SECULARISM IN THE POSTCOLONIAL INDIAN NOVEL

NATIONAL AND COSMOPOLITAN NARRATIVES IN ENGLISH

NEELAM SRIVASTAVA

Routledge Research in Postcolonial Literatures

Secularism in the Postcolonial Indian Novel

This study explores the connections between a secular Indian nation and fiction in English by a number of postcolonial Indian writers of the 1980s and 1990s. Examining writers such as Vikram Seth, Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, Shashi Tharoor, and Rohinton Mistry, with particularly close readings of *Midnight's Children, A Suitable Boy, The Shadow Lines* and *The Satanic Verses*, Neelam Srivastava investigates different aspects of postcolonial identity within the secular framework of the Anglophone novel.

The book traces the breakdown of the Nehruvian secular consensus between 1975 and 2005 through these narratives of postcolonial India. In particular, it examines how these writers use the novel form to rewrite colonial and nationalist versions of Indian history, and how they radically reinvent English as a secular language for narrating India. Ultimately, it delineates a common conceptual framework for secularism and cosmopolitanism, by arguing that Indian secularism can be seen as a located, indigenous form of a cosmopolitan identity.

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Secularism in the Postcolonial Indian Novel

National and cosmopolitan narratives in English

Neelam Srivastava

ROUTLEDGE
Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 2008
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada
by Routledge
270 Madison Ave, New York, NY 10016

This edition published in the Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2007.

"To purchase your own copy of this or any of Taylor & Francis or Routledge's collection of thousands of eBooks please go to www.eBookstore.tandf.co.uk."

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Srivastava, Neelam Francesca Rashmi, 1972–
Secularism in the postcolonial Indian novel : national and cosmopolitan narratives in English / Neelam Srivastava.
p. cm. – (Postcolonial literatures)
Includes bibliographical references (p.) and index.
1. Indic fiction (English)–20th century–History and criticism.
2. Secularism in literature. 3. Cosmopolitanism in literature.
4. Postcolonialism in literature. 5. Identity (Psychology) in literature.
6. India–In literature. I. Title.
PR9492.6.S35S67 2007
823'91409–dc22 2007011776

ISBN 0-203-93934-4 Master e-book ISBN

ISBN10: 0–415–40295–6 (hbk)
ISBN10: 0–203–93934–4 (ebk)

ISBN13: 978–0–415–40295–8 (hbk)
ISBN13: 978–0–203–93934–5 (ebk)

This book is dedicated to my parents and to my brother

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Acknowledgements

The process of writing a book involves an immense debt of gratitude to a great number of people and institutions over many years. First, I would like to thank the School of English at Newcastle University for generously providing me with a semester's leave so I could complete the project. The book evolved out of my D.Phil. thesis at Oxford. My supervisor, Jon Mee, was a truly important mentor. Rajeswari Sunder Rajan has been instrumental in making this book come to light: with her academic example, with her practical and affectionate support, and her constant encouragement. Robert Young and Leela Gandhi have been great mentors, and gave me essential feedback and encouragement throughout this project. Joy Wang has been a generous-hearted friend, an amazing intellectual companion, and carefully read sections of this book. I am very grateful to Baidik Bhattacharya for reading a chapter of this book and for many stimulating discussions. I am very grateful to James Procter for his careful reading of the proposal and of book sections.

I would like to thank the librarians at the Indian Institute Library of Oxford, where I completed my research for my D.Phil. thesis. I would like to thank Linacre College, Oxford, for their financial support. My heartfelt thanks to the Political Science department of the South Asia Institute in Heidelberg.

This book would not have been possible without the constant love, encouragement and support of my parents, Giulia Pancheri and Yogi Srivastava, and my brother Amrit.

Numberless thanks go to Eleanor Spaventa, for being so integral to my personal and academic life that it is hard to extricate all the multiple strands that join us together. Luisa Calè has been a great friend and an important intellectual and academic mentor, and read part of the manuscript. Ilaria Esposito, Mike Enskat, Florian Finck, Livia Capponi, Giulia Manca, and Matthew McCartney provided their love and support. Thanks to Uttara Natarajan, who provided me with accommodation in Oxford for the completion of my research. Thanks to all my students who helped me to clarify many of the ideas in this book.

Last but not least, I would like to thank Vikram Seth, whose novel, *A Suitable Boy*, has done so much to change my life since I first read it.

An earlier version of Chapter 7 of this book originally appeared in 2005 as 'Languages of the Nation in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* and Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy*', *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature* 36(1–2): 207–31. Reprinted by permission of *ARIEL*.

Introduction

> 'Do you believe in the virtue of compression?' asked a determined academic lady.
> 'Well, yes,' said Amit warily. The lady was rather fat.
> 'Why, then, is it rumored that your forthcoming novel … is to be so long? More than a thousand pages!' she exclaimed reproachfully, as if he were personally responsible for the nervous exhaustion of some future dissertationist.
>
> (Seth 1993: 1370)

This study delineates a 'secular' Indian canon in English. This canon comprises a number of contemporary South Asian novels in English that engage with secularism as an ideology for the Indian nation-state. Through an analysis of fictions of the 1980s and 1990s, I examine different aspects of postcolonial identity within the secular framework of the Anglophone novel. These different aspects include the question of secularism in the South Asian context; the issue of minority identity vis-à-vis the state; the different narratological models used to structure a narrative of India; the relationship to historical writing; the interaction between English and the vernacular (*bhasha*) languages. Finally, I focus on the relationship between cosmopolitanism and secularism, as two complementary concepts in South Asian writing in English.

This introduction presents a broad overview of the themes of the book, and contextualizes the novels in relation to some of the major events that characterized the trajectory of Indian secularism after independence, between 1947 and 2002.

The novel as a dialogic genre

At the basis of my reading of these texts is the emphasis on the novel as a dialogic and secular genre. The novel, because of its dialogic structure, emerges as the most versatile form for a staging of the conflict between secular and religious identity, because it allows for a heteroglot representation of conflicting worldviews and differing conceptualizations of the 'national' past. In its ability to accommodate different structures of thought it differs crucially from the writing of the social sciences, which is premised on the idea of science as a 'higher language' into which the other languages are translated, and which 'takes the modern historical

consciousness for granted' (Chakrabarty 2000: 75–6). Conversely, the dialogism of the novel form permits the staging of different perspectives without the necessity of a final resolution within an overarching rationalist framework. Mythical versions of the past or religious sentiment may coexist in a non-hierarchical relationship with the secular language of rationalism.

The novels I have chosen to discuss in this book are the following: Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981), *The Satanic Verses* (1988), Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* (1988), Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* (1989), Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy* (1993), Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* (1996). These are novels published in the 1980s and 1990s that narrate the story of India as a nation, and are specific responses to the political situation at the time of their writing. The novels mark out an important period in the history of the Indian polity, that of the breakdown of the Nehruvian secular consensus. This breakdown began with the National Emergency (1975–7) and was further threatened by the rise to prominence of an alternative national ideology, Hindutva, based on the supremacy of Hindu religion and culture. Indeed, these two events become a key focus of the novels I mention above. Secularism is a fundamental component of Indian postcolonial identity as it became a state policy adopted by Nehru after Independence, in the aftermath of Partition. In this historical context, these novels draw on the Nehruvian model of secularism and pluralist democracy to contest the erosion of the secular public sphere, though in different ways. The novels contain frequent allusions to Nehru's writing, most notably his book *The Discovery of India* (1946). More specifically, within this secular canon, *A Suitable Boy* and *Midnight's Children* are here seen to assume an exemplary status. *A Suitable Boy* presents a wholesale recuperation of Nehruvian secularism, premised on a rationalist approach, which predicates the importance of relegating religion to the private sphere. Seth's 'rationalist secularism' is sustained by the novel's realist mode, third-person omniscient narrator and a flexible, though uniform, English style. *Midnight's Children* exploits the dialogic possibilities of the novel form in order to question the compartmentalization of religion and politics. Rushdie's expressionistic style and his digressive and non-linear narrative juxtapose religious, mythic and secular worldviews as equal claimants to what constitutes the nation. I juxtapose rationalist and radical secularism as the two opposite discursive premises of Seth's and Rushdie's writing about the nation.

The novels' engagement with the secularism issue is at one with their concern with history as a 'secular genre', and the novels each revisit, in their own way, the historical novel. They all present an allegoresis of the Indian nation by recuperating different versions of the national past: in the sense that they present different configurations, or emplotments, of specific historical events in India's colonial and postcolonial history. Seth's novel tells the story of the early 1950s in India, in the style of a mimetic historical narrative where the plot appears to be found rather than invented. His mimetic narrative can be seen as a *symbolic* representation of the nation, in the sense that the unity between content and form, or meaning and representation, is unquestioned. *Midnight's Children* makes a self-conscious use of allegory to connect the life story of the narrator Saleem

Sinai to that of the Indian nation. The 'objectivity' of mimetic historical writing is put into question by Saleem's new way of writing Indian history. The profound dialogism of *Midnight's Children* is exemplified linguistically by the constant use of code-mixing and hybridization between English and Urdu in the text, which displays a deliberately jarring, expressionistic effect.[1] When compared to *Midnight's Children*, *A Suitable Boy* has a stronger tendency towards linguistic uniformity, which tends to translate into English dialogues and words 'originally' in Hindi, rather than leave them untranslated in the text the way Rushdie does.

In Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel*, key political events of Indian history are explicitly allegorized as episodes of the Sanskrit epic, the *Mahabharata*. There is an account of the Muslim League and the Congress Party during the nationalist period. The *Mahabharata* is restaged as a political and resolutely secular allegory for the history of the Indian nation, with revealing asides of the narrator, the sage Vyasa, about India's precolonial secularity before the British used the *divide et impera* strategy. The novel also ends on a defiantly secular note, against the Hindu concept of dharma, in a dialogue staged between the hero Yudhishtir and Dharma, 'god of justice and righteousness'. Against the idea of classical verities valid for all time, of unchanging notions of justice and righteous conduct, Yudhishtir argues for the acceptance of doubt and diversity, for the 'worship of humanity, and for the existence of more than one Truth' (Tharoor 1989: 418). *The Great Indian Novel*, like the other novels in the 'secular' canon I have mentioned, is characterized by the presence of a clearly interventionist narrator, who makes sense of Indian history and its characters for us, though there is a distinctively postmodern arbitrariness in his ordering of narrative meaning. This markedly monological interpretative framework lends a resolutely secular bent to the history being retold, a literary secularization of religious myth.

The (recent) rise of the Indian novel in English

Midnight's Children, published in 1981, and *A Suitable Boy*, published in 1993, mark an important period in Indian fiction in English, that of the international explosion of this fiction in the transnational literary market. The rise to international prominence of Indian English fiction was publicized by two Booker Prizes: the one awarded to Rushdie in 1981 for *Midnight's Children*, and the one awarded to Arundhati Roy in 1997 for *The God of Small Things*. This sixteen-year arc of literary production has been celebrated by Western reception as the work of the 'Rushdie generation', and has effectively condensed into a new world canon, that of the Indian novel in English. *Midnight's Children* projected an important influence on subsequent Indian fiction in English, on many different levels. It inaugurated a certain 'style' of writing about India, loosely identifiable with 'magical realism', which was to have great success in publishing and marketing 'postcolonial' fiction in the West. This was combined with a novel re-evaluation of nationalist representations of the Indian past. A consistent presence in many of these novels was a renewed focus on national history and a self-aware transformation of English into an 'Indian' literary idiom: *The Shadow Lines* (1988), Shashi Tharoor's *The Great*

Indian Novel (1989), Seth's *A Suitable Boy* (1993), Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* (1996), to give examples of the texts discussed in this book. A common theme in these novels is the construction of the narrator as historian, the novel as a stage for the representation of multiple or conflicting versions of historical events.

Rushdie, Tharoor, Mistry, Ghosh, and Seth are contemporaries of the *Subaltern Studies* collective of historians, who began to produce their ground-breaking historiography about India in those same years. Both these historical and fictional narratives aimed to radically critique the ideological underpinnings of the Indian nation-state, through an exploration of its colonial past and postcolonial present, and a reconsidered approach to the philosophy of history. The period of the National Emergency (1975–7) can be identified as a crucial historical watershed that marked the beginning of Indian intellectuals' reassessment of the meaning of Indian democracy and the 'achievements' of the postcolonial state.

Responding to India's 'present needs'

My book sets out to resituate these novels, and *Midnight's Children* and *A Suitable Boy*, in particular, in a South Asian context, demonstrating that they are specific responses to India's 'present needs'.[2] My choice of these novels was partly determined by their being texts that engage with pressing issues of public debate in India. After Independence, secularism, understood as non-sectarianism in the public sphere and the relegation of religion to the private sphere, became the foundation of state policy under Nehru. Each novel configures the relationship between religion and the state in such a way as to create different representations of the Indian nation, yet each equally relevant for an understanding of Indian secularism.

The novels produced by Indian writers in the 1980s and 1990s share a strikingly common aspiration to represent a pan-Indian reality, a rethinking of the nationalist representations of the past and of historical writing, while drawing on a range of different narrative traditions eclectically incorporated within the broad framework of the novel in English. The fact that they have taken on the role of 'narratives of the nation' is partly determined by the transnational scope of their readership. Peter van der Veer links the different audiences of television and literature in India to differences in the way the nation is imagined in these two mediums. The showing of the Hindu epic *Ramayana* on Indian television has demonstrated that while this 'traditional' text can be 'nationalized' and made to be the form in which the nation is imagined for its viewers, what characterizes the modern novel in the late twentieth century is that it is not written with reference to the nation as a bounded group of national 'readers'.[3] A fundamental corollary to his remark is that this transnational dimension almost exclusively characterizes the Indian novel *in English*, rather than the other Indian languages: it is only in English that the nation can be imagined for a wider audience that transcends national boundaries. As van der Veer comments, 'it is precisely this literary objectification of culture for a transnational audience, however, that produces national culture.

It is in the dialectic of the national and the transnational that the late twentieth-century novel situates itself' (van der Veer 1994: 182).

The novel becomes the literary form that creates the nation for a transnational audience, rather than an exclusively national one. More specifically, it appeals to an imagined community of readers represented by the Indian national and transnational English-speaking middle class. An idea of nation based on religion is produced by visual culture such as film and television, whose medium of communication is the *bhasha* languages, especially Hindi. Thus one can distinguish between a 'national' Indian nation, and a 'transnational' Indian nation, each distinct for the social, economic, urban/rural locations of its consumers; though of course the two audiences often overlap, especially given the strong middle-class support of Hindutva. The novel in English becomes the privileged form of writing for the latter.[4]

The inherently elitist quality of the secularist project has been the focus of much recent critical debate on secularism, most notably in the work of Ashis Nandy. According to Nandy, secularism's elitist nature made it fail to gain a more widespread political currency among the masses; it was seen as a Western-imported ideology that made little impact on the people's perceptions and ideological orientations towards the public sphere. Nandy's argument that the Indian elite did not succeed in making secularism a 'popular' national ideology appears convincing if one draws an analogy with Antonio Gramsci's celebrated critique of the 'cosmopolitan' intellectual. The Italian intellectuals' failure to communicate an idea of secular culture to the population at large allowed the Catholic Church a continued ideological influence over popular mentality:

> the lay forces … have been incapable of satisfying the intellectual needs of the people precisely because they have failed to represent a lay culture, because they have not known how to educate a modern 'humanism' able to reach right to the simplest and most uneducated classes, as was necessary from the national point of view, and because they have been tied to an antiquated world, narrow, abstract, too individualistic or caste-like.
>
> (Gramsci 1985: 211)

In some sense, the enormous popularity of the televised *Ramayana* over the extremely limited circulation of the Indian novel in English testifies to the different levels of circulation, among the Indian audience, of a popular cultural product informed by a religious intent and that of a secular and linguistically 'elitist' genre such as English-language fiction. I discuss the implications of Nandy's anti-secular stance in Chapter 1 of this book, and those of the 'cosmopolitan' intellectual in Chapter 8.

Determining factors in the development of contemporary Indian English fiction are addressivity and reception. Meenakshi Mukherjee remarks that the major difference between the audience of nineteenth-century novels in English and those being written today is in the 'sense of an audience' (Mukherjee 2003: 102). The tentativeness of the early novelists has been replaced by an overwhelming

confidence of contemporary Indian novelists both in the choice of language and in their global readership. The use of English signals a profound socio-economic divide between a small group of Anglophone writers catapulted to literary fame and the huge number of South Asians who cannot read English, and who perhaps would not consider the novel form as their preferred choice of entertainment or diversion. Certainly, the readership and marketing of these texts have been transnational for some decades now, and critical analysis needs to take on board this challenge. As Bishnupriya Ghosh argues in her study of postcolonial Indian texts and cosmopolitics,

> [A] strictly vertical nation-state-oriented analysis that places literary texts under the banner of national traditions cannot lead us to evaluate exactly how literary value is produced on a global market hungry for these neatly packaged commodities.
>
> (Ghosh 2004: 43)

There is a direct link between economic liberalization and the rise of Indian English literature; it had an important impact on English-language publishing, since it allowed Indian publishing to team up with transnational conglomerates such as Harper Collins and Penguin India (Ghosh 2004: 50). 'Huge structural changes' in the publishing industry made it possible for South Asian texts in English to circulate both at home and abroad, marking a distinct change from the earlier generation of novels by authors such as R.K. Narayan (Ghosh 2004: 50). Marketing processes of this kind tend to affect the construction of literary value of the Indian novel in English, and its relationship to a supposedly universal canon of world literature. The more 'global' the literary product is, the higher chance it has of being included into a world canon.

Yet, at the same time, the novels I analyse engage deeply with national concerns, despite critical accusations that they are 'deracinated'. *Midnight's Children*, *A Suitable Boy*, *A Fine Balance*, *The Shadow Lines*, *The Satanic Verses* and *The Great Indian Novel* are secular narratives of the nation-state, with strong ideas of what it means to be secular in India today. They engage intimately with national issues by responding to India's 'present needs' in different ways. They are historical novels, in the sense that they present versions of a national narrative built upon an interpretation of the Indian *nation*'s past (as opposed to India as a purely geographical and mythical location; the mythical and geographic elements are clearly present in the novels, but are subsumed into the novels' representation of the nation).

But as historical novels, they not only address different present needs, they are also implicitly premised on different notions of a philosophy of history. All the novels mentioned project a secular and multicultural vision of the Indian nation-state, which clearly reveals their debts to nationalism as articulated by Jawaharlal Nehru in *The Discovery of India*. *Midnight's Children* and *A Suitable Boy* can be said to be Nehruvian epics, and both present, in very different ways, a reworking and a recuperation of Nehru's idea of the Indian nation-state. The incorporation of India's multilingual diversity into the language of the novels helps to project the

ideals of secularism and of pluralist democracy at the basis of Seth and Rushdie's political visions.

There is another canon of works by Indian writers that does not fall into the category of the secular national narrative, but rather into the category of the cosmopolitan narrative. Cosmopolitan and secular, it can be argued, are two complementary categories. The secular can be defined by its contextually situated relationship to the nation, and in these particular cases, to Nehru's idea of the Indian nation. By contrast, the cosmopolitan category acquires a certain stature in Seth and Rushdie's writings, by drawing more strongly on a 'rootless' subject *outside* the nation-space, as the central focus of their fiction, poetry and autobiography (Seth's *The Poems 1981–1994*; *From Heaven Lake*; *An Equal Music*; *Two Lives*; Rushdie's *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*, *Fury*).

In the following section, I will examine more closely the idea of Nehruvianism as it evolved into a state policy after Independence, in order to set the scene for its ideological influences on the novels under discussion.

Nehruvianism and the developmental state

Nehruvianism defines the consensus that undergirded the Indian developmental state, referring to a particular distribution of political power and its legitimating vision of secular, autarkic growth (Rajagopal 2001: 32). In Indian political usage, it acquired its present meaning as a guiding concept for state policy under Nehru and the left-leaning components of the Indian Congress Party in the years just after Independence. Nehruvianism envisaged not an irreligious or anti-religious state, but rather a non-sectarian state, which did not privilege one religion over another.

Under Nehru, a secular approach was combined with a developmentalist idea of the nation-state. The state's post-Independence focus on economic development emphasized the prevailing belief that social change would follow in its wake. Indeed, during the first decades after Independence, according to Arvind Rajagopal, 'the work of the economy was seen to stand for and be capable of resolving any problems that arose in the sphere of culture; technocracy was in fact the form of politics' (Rajagopal 2001: 32). The language in which nation-building proceeded along secular and developmental lines was English. The post-Independence political and administrative conceptualizations of the nation-state at a pan-Indian level came to be constructed exclusively in the English language. This in part was due to the fact that the class that came to identify most closely with Nehru's secular and developmentalist ideology was the English-speaking upper-middle-class elite that had stood most to gain from state-planned economic development: the sizeable chunk of the Indian middle class who worked in the public sector, bureaucrats, civil servants, scientists, industrialists who received license permits from the Indian government.[5] English became the language in which the secular identity of the state was constructed; its founding texts in a sense were the Indian Constitution and Nehru's *The Discovery of India*. Land reform was one of the main planks of Congress's electoral

campaigns in the early years after Independence: the vow to put an end to 'feudal' land-holdings and redistribute land among the poorer tenants was one of the strategies that assured mass popularity. Nehru, basing his idea of Indian history on a European-based model of historical 'progress', saw 'the end of feudalism' as a symbolic and material act that would bring the nation from the Middle Ages into modernity. But Congress effected neither an equitable nor a complete redistribution of land among the small and medium cultivators. In *A Suitable Boy* the tenant Kachheru, who is a *chamar* (untouchable), is evicted from his village as an unintended consequence of the land reform designed to restore the land to people like him who had been cultivating it for centuries. Those who effectively stood most to gain from the land reforms were the medium land-holders. As it had done before Independence, Congress continued to rely on the upper-caste rural landlords and richer farmers to deliver the votes of those lower in the social order. Congress emerged as a unique political party in South Asia: 'a mass party with strong roots in the countryside yet given to political conservatism' (Khilnani 1997: 75). The strong rural basis of the Congress – both in terms of the wealth of some of its major landowning supporters and in terms of sheer voting numbers – made it difficult for the Congress to effect a just redistribution of land or promote large-scale industrialization of the country. The Zamindari Abolition Act, which took place state by state rather than on a federal level, is a central event in *A Suitable Boy*, whose national narrative adopts a teleological and developmental view of historical progress very similar to Nehru's own.

The end of the Nehruvian secular consensus

The Nehruvian secular consensus can be said to have lasted for the whole of Nehru's lifetime, and remained a dominant state ideology at least until the mid-1970s. In 1975, Indira Gandhi (Nehru's daughter and the Prime Minister at the time), availing herself of a constitutional clause, proclaimed a state of National Emergency, in which all civil liberties were suspended, censorship was imposed on the press, thousands of oppositional elements were jailed and all executive powers were concentrated in her hands: effectively, the Emergency was a dictatorship that lasted almost two years. The Emergency has been seen as the attempt to find an authoritarian solution to the problem of inducing political consent, in a period of great fragmentation and lack of support for the Prime Minister (Rajagopal 2001: 48). Prakash Chandra Upadhyaya identifies this event as the watershed between a Nehruvian and post-Nehruvian ideological orientation in Indian politics: 'since 1975, this model [of Nehruvian majoritarianism] has arguably been displaced, both in state policy and in national politics … Emergency rule undermined the existing structures of popular democracy from which secularism derived its nominal legitimacy' (Upadhyaya 1992: 828–9).

Christophe Jaffrelot locates the definitive erosion of the secularist and democratic norm in Indian politics in the 1980s. At this time, the Congress central government withdrew from the twin commitments of socio-economic development (upheld by Nehru's socialist path and Indira Gandhi's populism) and of secularism, the two

pillars of the 'legitimate norms of Indian politics'. In the 1980s, Congress began pushing for a policy of economic liberalization and manipulated communal issues for political purposes (Jaffrelot 1996: 336).

Midnight's Children's focus on the National Emergency was also to canonize it as a 'critical event' for other Indian writers of Rushdie's generation, such as Shashi Tharoor and Rohinton Mistry in particular. It can be read as an anti-Emergency novel. Unlike Rushdie, Mistry's 1996 novel *A Fine Balance* uses realism to present a political critique of the Emergency, portrayed as a period of great suffering for the lower castes and the dispossessed. Mistry's, it can be said, is a *retrospective* vision of the Emergency written from the point of view of the 1990s. There is a sense that the efforts of the Indian developmental state have not delivered the promises of independence – the theme of social change is central to the novel, but without the optimism and faith in the state and its institutions that characterize *A Suitable Boy*. Rather, Mistry's project recalls that of the French nineteenth-century novelists, Edmond and Jules de Goncourt, who used realism and *naturalisme* to effect a social denunciation, combining it with a reappropriation of the historical novel.[6]

During her premiership, Indira Gandhi had sought to promote a populist economic agenda. But radical economic policy did not reconcile easily with the bypassing of the democratic process, and by the mid-1970s an ever-widening split had occurred between state authority and the people, including representatives in opposition parties, labour unions and other organizations.[7] *Midnight's Children* allegorizes these oppositional forces in the magicians' ghetto, the place where the narrator Saleem finds a home after losing his family and fighting in the Pakistani Army.

Midnight's Children's structural digressions and linguistic excess can be read as a metaphor of the democratic forces rising up against the authoritarianism of the Emergency. The history of the Indian nation cannot be contained within the official narrative of the state, as Indira Gandhi tried to reinforce it during her reign, especially during the Emergency years (indeed the slogan of her electoral campaign was India is Indira, Indira is India). The multiple possibilities that had been unleashed by Independence, represented in the novel by the multifarious group of the midnight children, were inexorably being channelled into a single monolithic Indian identity that left little space for other identities – especially Muslims. Indira Gandhi herself is characterized as the Widow, with all the most negative connotations that this figure has in Indian popular consciousness.[8]

The novel is told from Saleem's present temporal location, 1977, looking back onto India's recent past, a history of the idea of India as a nation. The narrative begins in 1915, with the story of his grandfather's loss of faith. This loss of faith, or radical doubt of the existence of God, is closely followed by his conversion to the nationalist cause, and ends with Saleem who is about to experience disintegration into 600 million constitutive identities, the population of India. His narrative of India is reacting against an authoritarian state; hence his anti-statism, and his writing of a defiantly pluralist and centrifugal history of India, where the trajectory of Muslim identity figures prominently. *Midnight's Children* cannot endorse the idea of a single national identity, because it is narrated from a minoritarian perspective,

that of the Muslim Saleem Sinai (though in the course of the novel he reveals his multiple parentage, Hindu and British as well).

The Emergency marked the turning-point in which the historical consensus represented in the Congress began effectively to unravel. Thus we can place *Midnight's Children* at the cusp of the crisis of the Nehruvian, socialist, secular state: it is an irony that the word 'secular' was introduced into the Constitution to define the Indian republic in 1976, right in the middle of the Emergency, a time when faith in Indian democracy and pluralism was being decisively eroded among the Indian public. *Midnight's Children* documents this gradual erosion and its entire take on the history of the Indian nation is shaped by the fact of its being an anti-Emergency narrative. Saleem's obsession with centrality is questioned as being similar to Indira Gandhi's; not a 'healthy' myth of the nation, which is arguably essential if a nation is to prosper, but a paranoid megalomania:

> Was my lifelong belief in the equation between the State and myself transmuted in the Madam's mind, into in-those-days-famous phrase: *India is Indira and Indira is India*? Were we competitors for centrality – was she gripped by a lust for meaning as profound as my own – and was that, was that why …?
>
> (Rushdie 1981: 420)

A Fine Balance, on the other hand, presents its retrospective, secular narrative of the Emergency through the use of a sympathetic and socially conscious third-person omniscient narrator. The Emergency is portrayed as an event that brings together four people of different social extractions and of different religions, within a tight though temporary microcosm symbolized by the tiny apartment of the impoverished Parsi widow, Dina Dalal (a very different widow to the reigning one of the time). A stronger, more defined and pessimistic sense of the directions taken by the Indian state in the 1970s and after characterizes *A Fine Balance*, in contrast to Seth's historical reconstruction of a previous period of Indian post-Independence history.

A Suitable Boy and the rise of the Hindu right

A Suitable Boy, published in 1993, was responding to a different political context from that of *Midnight's Children*. The novel, which has an omniscient third-person narrator, is set between 1950 and 1952, key years in the period that witnessed the rise of the Indian middle class and the consolidation of the Indian state along secular lines under India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru. In its representation of social, political and economic changes in the first years after Independence, the novel endorses a progressivist and gradualist approach to the dynamics of social transformations.[9] Seth's optimistic faith in the potential of the Nehruvian developmental state is not shared by his contemporaries, such as Mistry, Ghosh and Rushdie. While many of their novels present an implicit or explicit endorsement of Nehruvian ideals, they address the ever-widening gap between state and nation in the post-Emergency years.

A Suitable Boy is a narrative of origins of the Indian state. A characteristic of the historical novel is that its version of the national past implicitly projects an ideal present and future for the nation. The historical novel becomes a way to make the past accessible to the present, and to assert a metonymic contiguity of the past with the present; the assumption being that if we follow the narrative to its beginning, we can reach the 'point of origin' of national history (Pierce 1992: 305). The novel's plot revolves around four Indian families, each one a different incarnation of the Indian elite: three are Hindu, one is Muslim. The realism of Seth's style is underscored by a developmental and statist idea of the nation-state, which endorses Nehruvian secularism at a time when Nehru's idea of the Indian secular state was subject to severe erosion in the political sphere, with the rise of the pro-Hindu Bharatiya Janata Party. Secularism was being displaced as a hegemonic political solution for conceiving and running the Indian state, especially in its relation to minorities. The rise of the Hindu right, and the spread of Hindutva ideology, was premised on a perceived need to break with the past. The Hindu nationalists did so paradoxically, by claiming to return to a deeper, purer past. To be Hindu, for them, 'became a triumphant declaration of strength and vigor, and the symbol of an aggressive culture on the ascendant' (Rajagopal 2001: 35). They defined the state's earlier secular policy, in particular its treatment of the Muslim minority as minority appeasement: Nehruvian secularism was accused of excluding Hindu culture and religion from public life, while making generous allowances to minorities, to the extent of providing for community-based civil codes for certain minorities.

The middle class and big business began to view Hindutva ideology as a new form for conceiving national identity; and, on a more pragmatic level, a new way for garnering mass consent by its political appropriation of Hindu religious symbols, which for many potential voters formed part of their lived experience of faith. A turning-point for the BJP was the Ram Temple movement, that culminated in 1991 with the demolition of the Babri Mosque in Ayodhya, that had been erected on a site supposedly built to mark the birthplace of Ram. The local Congress leaders did nothing to stop the demolition, which showed to what extent Congress was implicated in the championing of Hindutva.

The India of *A Suitable Boy* has a strong relationship to the period in which the novel was published. The cultural and social mores of 1950s India are still easily recognizable in the India of the 1990s. But the political present of 1993 had witnessed a radical shift in the hegemonic ideology of the Indian public sphere: Nehruvian secularism was out, Hindutva ideology was in. Essential Indianness was equated with Hinduness. History was being rewritten along communal lines and the Muslims were seen as invaders and destroyers of a pure Aryan culture that the more extreme proponents of Hindutva were intent on recuperating. The novel can be read as a way of addressing the perceived 'present needs' of the Indian polity by proposing a return to Nehruvianism, by recreating a national narrative set in the heart of the Nehru era, the heyday of secular nationalism in the aftermath of Partition. Thus, contrary to Hindutva ideology, Seth proposes not a break with the nation's secular past, but a return to it in order to address

the present needs of the polity, which is being fragmented along communal lines. Multiculturalism, rather than a majoritarian ideology like Hindutva, is the only solution for a functioning polity. What Seth appears to have in mind is a strongly statist multiculturalism à la Nehru.

One of the central political events in the novel is a so-called 'communal riot', sparked by religious strife between Hindus and Muslims; this conflict is portrayed as a failure of citizenship, a failure to discard pre-existing religious identities *in the public sphere* of the city streets, in favour of a new national Indian secular identity. In Chakrabarty's words, 'even today the Anglo-Indian word "communalism" refers to those who repeatedly fail to measure up to the secular ideals of citizenship' (Chakrabarty 2000: 33). *A Suitable Boy* could even be seen as a literary reaction to the screening of the *Ramayana* on state television, a broadcast which van der Veer and Rajagopal contend was a way for imagining the nation on religious, rather than secular terms.[10]

Nation versus state

The novels that are here seen as representative of the Indian secular canon in English, are 'historical' in the sense that they respond to specific moments of India's historical and political context at the time of publication. They all engage with the question of secularism and conceive the novel form as non-sectarian, though it is secular in different ways in each author. Whereas visual culture, such as movies and television, is able to mobilize audiences into imagining the nation as a religious construct, the novels written by Rushdie and Seth conceived of the nation in secular terms. These novels create an imagined community of readers who are not defined by national boundaries, but by the transnational scope of English.

Midnight's Children, *A Suitable Boy*, *A Fine Balance*, *The Great Indian Novel*, *The Satanic Verses*, *The Shadow Lines* narrate a radical shift in the perception of the public sphere in India. New forms of political participation with the rise of the BJP and caste-based politics in the Indian states also signalled that the language of the political elite, and indeed of the public sphere, was no longer English, just as political conceptions of the nation were no longer dominated by secularism. The novels have different approaches to the idea of the state, which indeed underwent an important evolution between the end of the Emergency and the beginning of the 1990s. *A Suitable Boy* gives great space to democratic debates within the Legislative Assembly, which becomes the symbol of nation-building; here the different voices representing the electorate enter in dialogue with each other. But Seth shows that democracy can only function *within* institutions, such as the Legislative Assembly and the courtroom (where much of the Zamindari Abolition Act is debated). There is no legitimacy attached to violent insurgency such as riots; the perpetrators of riots are portrayed as a mob, not as citizens. The rioters are situated *outside* the nation-space; they are 'not yet' citizens.[11] This could be read as a defence of democratic institutions that were envisaged by the Constitution as the only bodies that could guarantee fair and equal treatment of minorities within a secular space.

In the context of political developments of the 1980s and 1990s, this defence appears as a response to the progressive Hinduization of the nation-space, that wishes to deny a representative space to Muslim identity as a fundamental part of Indian identity. *A Suitable Boy*, in its deploring of communalism and endorsement of a statist secularism, displays the recent uneasiness on the part of left-leaning activists and intellectuals towards these new ideas of the nation based on religious separatism. The novel's 'solution' in this sense is to return to Nehru, as do several of his contemporaries (though in Rushdie's 1995 novel, *The Moor's Last Sigh*, a stuffed dog is tellingly named Jawaharlal Nehru). A remarkably *similar* narrative emerges out of these novels published in the 1980s and 1990s, one that stresses the values of secularism, democracy, progress and development.

What we find, in the novels of the 1980s and 1990s, is also an increasing assumption of responsibility towards the narrative; this might be because they are writing about events whose urgency and immediate political, social and human relevance override any possible postmodernist renunciation of the role of 'author'. The horrifying genocide of Muslims that took place in Gujarat in 2002 has been a recent testing-ground for Indians and their commitment to a secular polity, and has further exacerbated the fissure between nation and state in contemporary India. Most importantly, it opens up the question of *who* is to define the nation in a time of increasing religious polarization, not only in India, but in the public spheres around the world. In 2002, in the state of Gujarat, 2,000 Muslims were massacred by mobs, with the clear connivance of the police and of the state government headed by Narendra Modi. The 'riots' were supposedly a reaction to the burning of a train full of right-wing Hindu supporters on the part of Muslims, though there are suspicions that this was merely an excuse. The massacre that took place was especially appalling for the level of violence against its victims (most shocking was the sexual violence against women), the fact that the mob knew exactly who to target, the complicity of the police, the damage to Muslim houses and properties, the complicity and utter irresponsibility of the Gujarat state government towards its Muslim citizens. As the findings showed, 'There seems to be a clear target in the overall destruction – lives maimed and brutally snuffed out, the community crippled economically, religious and cultural symbols debased, and all signs of growth and modernity erased' (Concerned Citizens Tribunal 2002). The genocide was characterized by being organized and systematic; it also coincided with the tenth anniversary of the Ayodhya episode. An expert witness in the subsequent inquiry around the massacre declared:

> When cabinet ministers sit in control rooms and command operations, we must conclude there is an active desire on the part of the political establishment to deny protection to those being targeted by well-guided mobs. Once the tragic violence had taken place, the state compounded its non-constitutional functioning by actively preventing the confidence-building measures required for proper rehabilitation.
>
> (Concerned Citizens Tribunal 2002)

The police and militant Hindu groups such as the VHP and the RSS mobilized Dalits and other marginalized groups to attack Muslims; there was an aggressive communalization of low-caste communities on the part of those in power. Many symbolic Hindu processions (*yatras*) were carried out, as a clear signal to the Muslims that this was a Hindu-dominated state. A major consequence of the massacre was the enforced ghettoization of Muslims, many of whom had previously lived next to Hindu neighbours. But after the genocide, even secular-minded Muslims were forced to live in Muslim-dominated areas. After the massacre, a committee called 'Concerned Citizens Tribunal' was formed, with the express intent of publicizing all the findings about the responsibility of the perpetrators, and of bringing the latter to justice. Secularism was evidently still a very important value for a significant section of the Indian population.

Episodes such as this have prompted an interesting critical readjustment to the idea of secularism. As we shall see in Chapter 1, Indian state secularism – and secularism more generally as an intellectual position – has been variously attacked by both right and left scholars. However, there is also an increasing sense among Indian intellectuals that the notion of secularism – and indeed of the state – needs to be salvaged and recuperated. The writings of Rushdie, Seth, Ghosh, Mistry, engage deeply with the issue of the state, and though critical of it, display a reformist rather than revolutionary attitude (Sunder Rajan 2003: 8).

What this secular Indian canon points to is a need for a 'practical' secularism, that, despite ideological or theoretical differences on the issue of 'how to be secular', presents a united front against brutal attacks on minorities with the connivance of the state, such as those recently witnessed in Gujarat in 2002. There is an increasing sense, among cultural theorists, that terms such as 'secularism', 'democracy', 'human rights', and even, perhaps, the 'state', while full of problematic uses and misuses, nevertheless retain a strategic potential for initiating change and providing a framework of values from which to articulate an alternative to the religious and ideological polarizations that more and more mark any debate on cultural difference. A typical example of this polarization is Gil Anidjar's recent provocative attack on the very notion of secularism:[12]

> Secularism's keywords – consensual words for one keyword among others – are human rights, international law, sovereignty, democracy, and so forth, all of which are avowedly secular projects that have yet to achieve equality. Is it possible to be for or against these? However reductive this might be as well, it is not difficult to see that such words are the new or resuscitated names of a not so-new civilizing mission and that they work in tandem with the negated binary terms they seek to oppose or repress (but in fact *produce*, as Foucault taught us). It is not that Said's words on religion recall the Orientalists' Orient as if by *analogy*. Rather, religion *is* the Orient, the imperial realm to be governed and dominated, bombed, reformed, and civilized.
>
> (Anidjar 2006: 66)

Anidjar makes the important (if rather obvious) point that secularism is being constantly used as a synonym for Western civilization in contemporary media and political rhetoric around the Iraq war and Afghanistan, while in actual fact it hides (or rather makes little attempt to hide) a strongly Christian discourse with a profoundly anti-Islamic bias. However, what are we left with, if we decide to eliminate the terms he considers as 'consensual keywords'? And moreover, why should Islam be incompatible with notions such as human rights, democracy and secularism? Other recent theorists have argued for a faithfulness to secularist practice 'in the letter', as Spivak puts it. It would be obtuse and frankly reactionary to condemn secularism as an imperialist practice *tout court*, given the dangerous hegemony of radical and violent religious discourses in the public spheres of so many nation-states today:

> Our world shows us that secularism is not an episteme. It is a faith in reason in itself and for itself, protected by abstract external structures – the flimsiest possible arrangement to reflect the human condition: under the circumstances, I invite you to think of secularism as an active and persistent practice, as an accountability of keeping the structures of agency clear of belief as faith. Secularism is too rarefied, too existentially impoverished to take on the thickness of a language. It is a mechanism to avoid violence that must be learned as mere reasonableness. It is thin as an ID card, not thick as 'identity'.
>
> (Spivak 2004: 106)

Very useful, in my opinion, is this idea of secularism as a form of accountability, as well as a demand for it at the same time. Spivak rightly points out the dangers of making a 'language' out of secularism; on the other hand, it indicates a commitment to avoid violence, and for example, to bring the perpetrators of the Gujarat massacre to justice, in the name of the *Indian Constitution*, among other things.

In a similar spirit, Rajeswari Sunder Rajan has also recently offered her critique of the Indian state in relationship to women and the law 'as grounded in the belief that the state in India continues to have a central directive role in social and economic issues and that, consequently, political struggle is most usefully directed at the state to make it accountable in these matters' (Sunder Rajan 2003: 7). Secularism, like democracy, is a 'vulnerable', as opposed to a 'bad', idea; it is important to maintain a critique of these notions while acknowledging the faultlines that run through them (Spivak 1990: 76). This book attempts to keep this focus on the values of secularism, while simultaneously exploring the ways in which the dialogical position of the novels under discussion question, affirm, engage with these values.

Outline of the book

Chapter 1 presents a short history of Indian secularism and discusses different theories of secularism. I outline the two concepts of 'rational' and 'radical'

secularism that are discussed in relation to the novels. The rationalist or transcendent perspective on religion is much in line with Nehru's relegation of religion to the private sphere, while a radically secular perspective is enunciated from minority positions. I show how radical secularism is akin to Saidian 'secular criticism' and defines a subject-position which attempts to bridge the gap between 'modern' (i.e. rationalist secular) and 'non-modern' (i.e. religious) worldviews. The concepts of conversion, translation and dialogism are discussed here as related communicative modes between these different worldviews. I discuss the reasons why the secular genealogy of the Indian novel in English stems from Nehru, rather than from the Gandhian conception of 'tolerance' fashioned out of a creative religious syncretism.

The second chapter maps these two secular positions, the rationalist and radical, in two novels. I explore how in *A Suitable Boy*, the third-person omniscient narrator subsumes the conflicting religious worldviews of the communities represented in the novel into his secular rationalist perspective. In *Midnight's Children* the first-person narrator continually oscillates between belief and scepticism, displaying a wariness of any fixed belief which rejects any ideological hierarchy between religious and secular imaginings of the nation.

Chapter 3 relates the concept of syncretism in Amitav Ghosh's novel *The Shadow Lines* to a discussion of *The Satanic Verses* as a complex experiment in Rushdie's 'poetics of doubt'. This 'dissenting' text is placed in relation to the 'Rushdie affair' in the Western and Islamic public spheres and the differing roles of literature within them.

Allegoresis, or the configuration of events into a narrative, in the postcolonial Indian novel is considered in Chapter 4. I discuss the representation of crowds and mobs as recurrent tropes of the nation in postcolonial Indian fiction. *A Suitable Boy* and *A Fine Balance* enact a naturalistic correspondence between a fictional and empirical India. *Midnight's Children* and *The Great Indian Novel* use allegory and myth to structure their versions of the Indian past, and in so doing superimpose the mythical time of the epic onto the secular time of history. These different forms of narrative are connected to Seth's and Mistry's use of realism and Rushdie's and Tharoor's subversion of it.

Chapter 5 discusses the concept of 'historical event' in relation to national Indian history, by comparing postcolonial Indian fiction with the work of the *Subaltern Studies* collective of historians. This chapter relates the notion of 'event' in Michel Foucault, Paul Ricoeur and Hayden White to the rethinking of South Asian pasts on the part of Indian novelists and historians. Here I discuss two intertextual sources for *Midnight's Children*: Stanley Wolpert's *A New History of India* and Nehru's *The Discovery of India*.

In Chapter 6 there is a discussion of A *Suitable Boy* and *A Fine Balance* as superb examples of realist historical novels. While it does not radically question issues of representation, Seth's and Mistry's use of realism enables an attentive and politically committed reconstruction of historical events such as the Zamindari Abolition Act and the 'making' of a popular riot, seen as crucial stages within a developmental narrative of the Indian nation-state.

The seventh chapter examines the interaction between English and the *bhasha* languages in *Midnight's Children* and *A Suitable Boy*. The polyphonic structure of *Midnight's Children* is linked to Rushdie's use of an expressionistic Indian English, characterized by code-mixing between English and Urdu. The monologic structure of *A Suitable Boy* is characterized by a more uniform language, which translates almost all of the *bhasha* terms into English. Whereas in *Midnight's Children* they appear as a studied babble of idiolects devoid of ideological hierarchy, in *A Suitable Boy* the different social languages which make up the voices of the novel are composed into a 'structured stylistic system' which reveals a more orderly – one could say statist – idea of the nation.

Chapter 8 will examine the notion of cosmopolitanism in writings by Rushdie and Seth that do not focus on the representation of the Indian nation-state. It argues that the global reach of English-language fiction does not necessarily coincide with a 'cosmopolitan' sensibility. This disjuncture is the case with most of the novels analysed in the previous chapters, which take on the role of national narratives, while simultaneously and self-consciously addressing a transnational audience. Conversely, Seth's poetry and travel writing project his autobiographical experience as central to his version of 'Indianness', when contrasted with the omniscient objectivity of *A Suitable Boy*. It will examine how Rushdie's celebration of a 'rootless' cosmopolitanism in *Fury*, foreshadowed in *The Ground Beneath Her Feet,* evolves out of the politically committed localism of *Midnight's Children*.

In its renewed attention to postcolonial Indian English novels as historical fictions and sources of literary-linguistic innovation, my study alters the overly ideologized dynamics of current 'postcolonial' readings by exploring how narrative dialogism stages secular and religious perspectives within the same text without a final resolution. In so doing, it seeks to delineate how an ethical stance clearly emerges from the Indian novel in English, corresponding to the endorsement of a 'practical' secularism, a form of accountability that endeavours to engage with belief while upholding the importance of the separation between secularism and religion in the public sphere.

1 Theories of secularism

The novels discussed in this book can be seen to form a secular canon in English. *Midnight's Children*, *A Suitable Boy*, *The Satanic Verses*, *The Shadow Lines*, *A Fine Balance*, and *The Great Indian Novel* can be read as historical novels, in the sense that they are intimately caught up in the debate around secular and religious identities in the public sphere that gained increasing momentum in India and Britain of the 1980s and 1990s. The progressive polarization of the public sphere into communal identities, a characteristic of recent South Asian politics, has produced new versions of Pakistani/Indian narratives seeking to organize national history along religious lines. In India, the rise of the Hindu right has resulted in a sidelining of secular nationalism, based on the idea of a composite national culture, in favour of Hinduized versions of it.

The novels mentioned above have a visible Nehruvian matrix, though they each present a different perspective on this debate, which is articulated in two distinct understandings of the term 'secularism'. A theoretical definition of 'secularism' in a political context is given here by Donald E. Smith:

> The secular state is a state which guarantees individual and corporate freedom of religion, deals with the individual as a citizen irrespective of his religion, is not constitutionally connected to a particular religion nor does it seek either to promote or interfere with religion.
>
> (Smith 1963: 4)

This chapter presents an account of the historical evolution of Indian secularism and offers two interpretative frameworks of it in relation to the novel form, namely the concepts of 'rationalist' and 'radical' secularism. By the first type I mean the relegation of religious belief to the private sphere and the construction of the public sphere as a realm of 'reason'.[1] Rationalist secularism indicates the prevalence of a scientific temper, a rationalization of the worldview of the individual, and the reduction of religious belief to affect. This rationalist or transcendent secularism is the discourse that formed the basis of state secularism in India after Partition. 'Transcendental' defines the subordination of belief to the claims of reason, to borrow a term from Gauri Viswanathan's account of secularization in nineteenth-century Britain (Viswanathan 1998: 12).

The concept of radical secularism, premised on Edward Said's secular criticism as an anti-totalizing activity, is an attempt to go *beyond* the rationalist premises of Nehruvian secularism. Secular criticism is an invitation to rethink, from within the postcolonial present, the narrative of progress that underlies the very notion of secularization. Thus 'the terms of Nehruvian secularism have to be turned against it with the demand that it "secularize" itself' (Mufti 1998: 117).

Both the development and questioning of Nehru's rationalist premises find a particularly fertile space in *Midnight's Children*, *The Satanic Verses* and *A Suitable Boy*. It will be argued that the novel is the genre most suited for the articulation of the tension between rationalist and radical secularism, through its use of dialogism. The texts explore the dialogic potential of the novel form in different ways. *Midnight's Children* radically juxtaposes worldviews within the 'unreliable' narrative voice of Saleem Sinai. *The Satanic Verses*, pushing dialogism to its extremes, presents three different narrative strands with varying forms of narration and style, interspersing a subversive narrative about the origins of Islam with a spiritualist fairytale and a contemporary account of the two main protagonists, Gibreel Farishta and Saladin Chamcha. *A Suitable Boy* presents a more 'moderate' form of dialogism; it presents different perspectives on religion and rationality, but ultimately subordinates all religious claims in the public sphere to an overarching rationalist secularism. The construction of the public sphere in *A Suitable Boy* privileges rational debate in such a way as to unproblematically replicate the idea of the public sphere in Western philosophy:

> The public of 'human beings' engaged in rational-critical debate was constituted into one of 'citizens' wherever there was communication concerning the affairs of the 'commonwealth'. Under the 'republican constitution' this public sphere in the political realm became the organizational principle of the liberal constitutional state. Within its framework, civil society was established as the sphere of private autonomy (everyone was permitted to pursue his 'happiness' in any way he thought useful).
>
> (Habermas 1992: 106–7)

The South Asian public sphere, however, has evolved in a different way from the West. It is by now a commonplace to observe that Western political theory is at a distinct loss to account for the directions taken by the Indian polity after Independence. As Sudipta Kaviraj observes, more than a crisis of the state, it is a crisis of theory (2001: 316). He believes, as do Partha Chatterjee and Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, that the state and politics in India are still vital sources of change and perhaps even at some levels guarantors of social justice. Chatterjee distinguishes between civil and political society in India. He finds this distinction particularly pertinent for its 'peculiar' polity, and is premised on a difference between citizens and population that emerges out of postcolonial technologies of governance. Civil society, as the above quotation from Habermas shows, is usually composed of citizens, and 'has been built around a secularized version of Western Christianity' (Chatterjee 2000: 40). But citizens, i.e. individuals who are

full members of society (and hence by implication with some degree of education and status), are still a small elite in India. The Indian postcolonial state emerged as a developmental state, inheriting the legacy of the colonial state that aimed to improve the social, economic and cultural conditions of its subjects; and its object was the 'population'. Chatterjee outlines an intermediary actor, which he calls political society, between the state and civil society, composed of those who forge informal and unregulated alliances with those in power, outside the normative structures of democratic politics. These Indians are often at the margins of society and in many cases violating the law, such as the poor tailors Om and Ishvar in Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*, whose fate depends on their relations with the slum bosses in the illegal shantytowns where they live, and who in turn depend on politicians for favours. Chatterjee remarks that

> the agencies of the state and of non-governmental organizations deal with these people not as bodies of citizens belonging to a lawfully constituted civil society, but as population groups deserving welfare. The degree to which they will be so recognized depends entirely on the pressure they are able to exert on those state and non-state agencies through their manœuvres in political society – by making connections with other marginal groups, with more dominant groups, with political parties and leaders, etc.
>
> (2001: 177)

Mistry brilliantly shows how the slum-dwellers attempt to forge good and also *rational* social relations with their neighbours, through the informal economy and the complex system of exchange of favours. The intervention of the state, at its worst during the Emergency, shows how these rational and sociable modes of coexistence are destroyed by the brutal slum-clearing and the inhuman forced sterilization of the poor inhabitants.

Ultimately my analysis hopes to show the tensions between the radical secular and the rational secular positions within the novels, that designate what Homi Bhabha calls the 'double temporality' of postcolonial identity formation. On the one hand, there is 'the process of identity constituted by historical sedimentation (the pedagogical)', and shaped by a secularism based on Enlightenment values articulated from a majoritarian position. On the other hand, there is 'the loss of identity in the signifying process of cultural identification', a reading of history which seeks to open up the rigidities of the secularist position, in other words, to dialogize it (Bhabha 1994: 153). Arguably, Bhabha's elaboration of the tension between the performative and the pedagogical in the nation-space was developed through an attentive rereading and recasting in theoretical terms of Rushdie's fictional œuvre up to *The Satanic Verses*. Fiction could thus be seen as the site where a dialogical secular position can be most comprehensively articulated.

The novels of the 1980s and 1990s that I discuss are all premised on a pluralist idea of the nation; clearly they stand out as non-sectarian narratives and they each represent a large number of different perspectives on Indian nationhood, 'the one yet many of national life' (Brennan 1990: 50). However, their staging of the

conflict between secular and religious positions differs quite radically. Specifically, *A Suitable Boy*'s more monological structure is characterized by a majoritarian perspective on secularism, which derives in turn from a rationalist outlook. *Midnight's Children*'s more polyphonic structure, on the other hand, articulates a secularist perspective enunciated from minority positions, and radicalizes the discrepancy between rationalist secular and religious worldviews by refusing to subsume the latter into the former. *The Satanic Verses* further complicates this conflict by radically questioning the dogmatic certainties of religion, providing an alternative and 'blasphemous' account of Mohammed's revelation from the angel Gabriel. Finally, though, the novels endorse secular positions; whether more or less critical of the ideal of a rational secular citizen as the ultimate goal for the Indian nation-state, none proposes a religious or 'metaphysical' perspective from which to write the nation. In recent times, critical debates have shown a tendency to recuperate religion, or religiosity, in theorizations of postcolonial identity, against the generally secularizing narratives offered by much postcolonial literature. Leela Gandhi has proposed a reconsideration of religion within the construction of the hybrid subject, in her ground-breaking study of fin-de-siècle radicalism in its relationship to anti-colonialism and the 'politics of friendship'. As she claims,

> all too often postcolonial 'authorities' like Salman Rushdie insist that an aesthetics or an ethics of hybridity is constitutively opposed to the domain of the sacred. Wedded to a carnivalesque politics of irreverence and demystification, Rushdie's version of hybridity paradoxically delivers … a potent immunity against the threat and temptation of religious belief.
>
> (Gandhi 2006: 128)

Gandhi emphasizes the need for 'a truly comprehensive critique' of the secular ethics represented by Kant's writing on religion, in order to make the point that 'self-pluralization' can be achieved through a metaphysical dimension as well, thus recuperating the religious and the mystical for 'postcolonial justice' (Gandhi 2006: 28).

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi's version of nationalism was the major non-secular alternative to the Nehruvian secular matrix from which Rushdie and Seth draw their ideological sustenance. Gandhian secularism does not mean a removal of religion from the public sphere, whereas this separation is seen as essential by Nehru for the working of a modern democratic nation-state. In the following sections, both Nehruvian and Gandhian, or rather, secular and religious, non-sectarian ideas of the nation will be discussed in turn.

What is Indian secularism?

The concept of the Indian secular state evolved from the liberal democratic tradition of the West, as opposed, for example, to Marxist secularism, which is hostile to religion as such. As mentioned earlier, Donald E. Smith's 'classic' definition of the secular state is a state that guarantees freedom of religion, deals

with an individual citizen irrespective of their religion, and does not have an official religion. Smith rightly points out that no country in the world perfectly fits this definition of secularism; Great Britain, which can be regarded as a secular state in many respects, still has a state church. In India, secularism is intended differently from how it is conceived in Western political thought; not as an anti-religious state, but as a non-sectarian one. Amartya Sen remarks that in order for a state to be secular, it is not required to stay clear of religion altogether, but it must guarantee a basic symmetry of treatment to all religions and religious communities (Sen 1996: 14).[2]

The differences in the way in which state secularism is conceived in Britain and the way it is conceived in India finds a telling example in the 'Rushdie affair'. The aftermath of the publication of *The Satanic Verses* shows the different value placed on literature and religious texts in a transnational 'liberal' readership and the Muslim readers (or in many cases non-readers) who took offence at the novel, for whom the political life of *The Satanic Verses* 'could not be contained within the rubric of the novel' (Mufti 1994: 330). What was going on in the Rushdie affair was precisely a clash between the construction of different kinds of reading communities: for liberal opinion, the book-burning that went on in Bradford was 'a straightforward rejection of the Enlightenment value of free speech'. Literature for the enlightened literary audience was as sacred as the Qur'an is for Muslims (van der Veer 1994: 188–9). But the Rushdie affair does not only show the different ways in which Muslims reacted to the publication of a blasphemous novel, but also the way in which the Indian state gave a different interpretation to secularism from the British state. In Britain the book was not banned:

> Instead, [Muslims] found that the project of the British state was not only to make them British citizens but to transform their moral identities. Englishness had to come first, before being Muslim. In a multicultural society one does not have to become a nonbeliever, but religious identity is a private matter in civil society, not a collective matter in political society. While these ideas were prevalent in India, the politics were more those of accommodation than integration.
>
> (Van der Veer 1994: 189)

India, on the other hand, was the first country to ban *The Satanic Verses*: 'The difference in reaction suggests that, despite the colonial project to introduce India to modernity, the novel, or literature in its modern, secular sense, is in India not as sacred as a religious text, like the Qu'ran' (van der Veer 1994: 189). The Rushdie affair exemplified a deeper schism between the public spheres of countries where Islam was considered a fundamental component of its national culture, and countries where it wasn't considered as such. In Britain, famously, the book couldn't be banned under the blasphemy law because this law only covered acts or texts considered offensive to the Christian faith. What the controversy reveals is just as much the supposed 'intolerance' of Muslims, as the concealed Judaeo-

Christian origins of contemporary European secularisms. As Srinivas Aravamudan comments in relation to *The Satanic Verses* controversy:

> The treatment of majority and minority religion in a genuinely equal fashion by the state is a complicated affair … Secularism in a particular polity is often successfully achieved by the ongoing transcendentalization of majority religion into a supposedly neutral culture, even as minority religious groups are challenged to assimilate to this dominant culture that in actual fact contains vestiges of anterior majoritarian religion, often so naturalized as to be invisible.
>
> (Aravamudan 2006: 190)

The Satanic Verses was not banned because Britain and Europe in general uphold the values of free speech, but the outraged liberal reaction to the fatwa and the book-burning also reveals the extent to which Muslim religious sentiment was not considered to be a constitutive part of the national culture (or European culture for that matter), the way, for example, Jewish identity might be.

Let us go back to the Indian context. In Indian political usage, secularism acquired its present meaning because of its adoption as a state ideology by Nehru and the Congress Party in the years after Independence. Nehru's conception of the Indian nation, as laid out in his 'foundational fiction', *The Discovery of India*, was inclusive, based on the idea of India as a 'composite culture'.[3] The multicultural thrust of Nehru's nationalism provides the ideological matrix from which Seth's and Rushdie's otherwise divergent secular narratives of the nation are constructed.

In *The Discovery of India*, Nehru constructed a secular past for India in order to show that religious and cultural tolerance was at the basis of Indian civilization. Against earlier nationalist historiography, that privileged the Hindu chauvinist interpretation of Indian history, Nehru promoted an idea of India as a

> secular entity, not a Hindu nation, that had cradled a variety of religions and sects through centuries, and had acquired a degree of unity while surviving conquests and conflicts. His *Discovery of India* was a documentation of this unity through history; and for him the nationalist movement was designed to free this unity so that India could join the world-historical march towards modernity.
>
> (Prakash 1990: 389)

The nationalist rewriting of Indian history along secular lines was to provide the basis for secularism as a political practice in post-Independence years, at least until the rise of Hindu extremism in politics in the late 1980s.[4] At the centre of Indian secular state ideology was not an irreligious or anti-religious state, but rather a non-sectarian state, which did not privilege one religion over another. The Congress concept of secularism can be summed up in the Sanskrit expression *sarva*

dharma samabhava = 'all religions should be treated equally'.[5] Nehru, in identifying secularism as the only approach which would guarantee the development of a truly integrated nation, said that it did not mean 'absence of religion, but putting religion on a different plane from that of normal political and social life. Any other approach in India would mean the breaking up of India' (Nehru 1980: 331).

Nehru, as a rationalist, thought religion should gradually be relegated entirely to the private sphere, and denied a space in the public arena. The role of religion in state-formation and nation-building appears ambivalent, to say the least, in the Indian Constitution, which provides for different civil codes for Hindus, Muslims, Parsis and Christians.[6] Nehru did not envisage an immediate and complete withdrawal of the state from religious affairs. He thought of the separation between church and state as a gradual process, and that the different personal law provisions for the majority community and the minorities such as Muslims and Christians would gradually be phased out in favour of a uniform civil code. But this has not happened to date.[7]

The difficulties of implementing a secular state in India were of course manifold. The ideal of a syncretic, tolerant civilization, propounded both by Nehruvian nationalism and, more recently, by the anti-secular critic Ashis Nandy, was at best optimistic in its depiction of inter-community relations in the precolonial past (Nandy 1998: 321–44). The fact that Hindus and Muslims (and other religious groups) had 'neighborly relations' for long periods does not mean that they revelled in social intermixing (Kaviraj 1990: 189). The idea that the syncretic culture of precolonial India foreshadowed modern secularism, and that colonialism disrupted this communal harmony, is the product of a specifically nationalist idealizing representation of the past.[8] However, as the historian Christopher Bayly rightly points out, in fact, there is no necessary antithesis between syncretic religious practice and communal violence, and the one does not necessarily exclude the other. Moreover, it is very likely that religious conflict in the precolonial period did not take the form of 'communalism' as it is intended today (indicating a wider unified consciousness drawn across religious or ethnic or caste lines). And certainly there is no 'teleology by which the conflicts of this period broaden out to provide the background for Hindu–Muslim or for Hindu–Sikh contention in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries' (Bayly 1998: 222). In recent times, communal discourse has attempted to construct a different history for the nation, organizing it on the lines of religious divides. Thus in the present situation it has become imperative for secularism to attempt a critical engagement with a religious worldview, without denying the possibility of a dialogical relation between the two positions.

A rationalist discourse informs the secularism of A *Suitable Boy*, premised as it is quite explicitly on a Nehruvian notion of politics and civil society, and emphasizing the importance of the separation between religion and politics. A much more radical interpretation of secularism is to be found in *Midnight's Children*. By radical secularism, I mean a critique which attempts to 'localize' transcendent secularism and its universalizing tendencies. It is a secularism which tries to take into account religious belief as a valid worldview not always already subordinated to the claims

of reason. In radical secularism, myth and belief are potentially equally valid cultural metanarratives as the metadiscourse of rationalist secularism. Most importantly, radical secularism attempts to foreground the problem of language and mediation; when passing from a rationalist secular worldview to a religious one, there is no overarching metalanguage that carries over from the first to the second. Therefore it becomes necessary to bridge the gaps between worldviews through other means, not through a universal language based on rationality; notions like translation, conversion and dialogism, as we shall see, are essential heuristic tools, or viable modes of 'communicative action', to move between these worlds.[9] Radical secularism emerges out of a critique of secularism as it developed historically both in Britain and in India. It is useful to turn to an analysis of the historical process of secularization to better understand the premises of rationalist secularism.

Secularization and national identity in Britain and India

The process of secularization was instrumental in establishing an ideological hierarchy where reason was to subordinate religious belief to its own claims. In order to illustrate the specifics of the Indian process of secularization, it is helpful to examine the parallel historical trajectory of secularism in Britain and India. In India, early anti-colonialism and nationalism were influenced by religious sensibilities, also due to the colonial strategy of enumeration on the basis of community and the granting of 'communal' electorates (Bose and Jalal 1998: 123–4). Only in the 1920s and 1930s, the historian Gyan Pandey suggests, did a more secularized, or to be precise, non-sectarian, concept of nationalism emerge, mainly due to the influence of Gandhi on the politics of the Congress Party. The passage from a more community-based nationalism to one based on the concept of Indian citizenship also involved a shift from the rationalization of Hindu tradition as a distinctive trait of Hindu identity to the development of a more inclusive and non-sectarian nationalism.

Viswanathan defines secularization as a process of redrawing 'the boundaries of the self' around nationhood and citizenship rather than religion (1998: 47). She recounts the secularization of the British state as a parallel development to Macaulay's influence on English educational policy in India, 'essentially a secular project to transform Indians into deracinated replicas of Englishmen, even while they remained affiliated to their own religious culture' (1998: 5). Thus the transformation of Hindus into non-Hindu Hindus, of Muslims into non-Muslims, and so forth, was a parallel colonial development to the social and political transformation of formerly disenfranchised groups such as Jews, Dissenters and Catholics into non-Jewish Jews, non-Catholic Catholics and so forth. Indeed, the second half of the nineteenth century witnessed a progressive internal articulation of national identity into private and public spheres; but there was no longer an unquestioned equation of Englishness with mainstream Anglicanism. Thus, Viswanathan argues, by the mid-nineteenth century with doctrinal allegiances

no longer determining Englishness, national identity required a differentiation between political and civil society.

Viswanathan draws out the implications of the overlap between a secular educational policy in the colonies, and the decline of ecclesiastical authority in England. This concurrence of events, among other things, introduced a politics of identity in British political life, 'where the grounds for Englishness are increasingly determined by the individual's ability to become detached from the *content* of local or regional affiliations while maintaining their form' (Viswanathan 1998: 13). On the one hand, 'the strengthening of the English state is predicated not by a single unified framework of ecclesiastical or missionizing doctrine but by the absorption of racial and religious "others" into a secular, pluralistic fabric' (Viswanathan 1998: 13). On the other, the necessary assimilation of formerly disenfranchised groups in order to be included in the British state entailed, to some extent, the effacement of their religiosity, while at the same time the state guaranteed their rights to property, conjugality and citizenship.

Historical secularization in Britain involved the separation of national identity from religious identity. But what of secularization in the Raj? Secularization in India was inextricably linked to the growth of reformist and nationalist movements in the mid to late nineteenth century, and yet its trajectory obviously follows a very different pattern from that of Britain.

First of all, the construction of an Indian identity emerged out of an assertion of difference from the culture of the colonizer. This process was different from the way national identity evolved in nineteenth-century Britain, where it partly arose out of the negotiation between the state and minorities campaigning for inclusion. Jewish admission into the British parliament consolidated the secular state by detaching religious qualifications from national identity. This separation between religious and national identity happened only at a later stage in the Indian nationalist movement. There were different stages in the evolution of Indian national identity from the late nineteenth century to the later nationalist period.

In the late nineteenth century, Bengali nationalists such as Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay identified Indian difference from the colonizer in cultural terms, rooted in a distinct religious identity.[10] Hence Indian difference from the colonizer mainly drew sustenance from a new self-consciousness about the distinctiveness of Hindu culture among the early nationalists.[11] Chatterjee's famous model for Indian nationalism internally differentiated national identity into two domains, the material and the spiritual. National identity was premised on a difference from the culture of the colonizer; but the difference was primarily marked within the so-called spiritual domain of identity, which comprised the 'inner' aspects of culture such as language or religion or the elements of personal and family life. Here the difference between the cultures of the colonized and the colonizer was emphatically foregrounded:

> The more nationalism engaged in its contest with the colonial power in the outer domain of politics, the more it insisted on displaying the marks of

'essential' cultural difference so as to keep out the colonizer from that inner domain of national life and to proclaim its sovereignty on it.

(Chatterjee 1993: 26)

The material, or outer domain of national identity, was of course a different matter. This comprised law, administration, economy and statecraft – here, nationalism 'fought relentlessly to erase the marks of colonial difference. Difference could not be justified in that domain. In this, it seemed to be reasserting precisely the claims to universality of the modern regime of power' (Chatterjee 1993: 26). According to Chatterjee then, the early nationalists conceived of national identity in India as a dual structure, whose public 'face' was dominated by the adoption of a Western rationality, and its private 'face' by (Hindu) religion, tradition, culture. For the nationalists, the Westernization of the material domain was not intended to extend to the spiritual domain, otherwise the self-identity of national culture would itself be threatened: 'What was necessary was to cultivate the material techniques of modern Western civilization while retaining and strengthening the distinctive spiritual essence of the national culture' (Chatterjee 1993: 120). The nationalists' project of rationalizing and reforming the traditional culture of Bengalis rejected individualism as a 'pernicious' Western value (Bankim defines it a 'habit of heartless isolation') and privileged narratives where the self was constructed in relation to the community.[12]

Thus Indian national identity came to be structured in a completely different manner from the British, for whom national identity became separated from religious belief, which was entirely relegated to the private sphere. In the early nationalist period, Hindu religion and culture became a distinctive and essential part of Indian identity. This cultural difference from Britain did not distinguish between religion and culture, unlike the separation between national and religious identity in the nineteenth-century British context. For the early Bengali nationalists, being Indian meant being Hindu, whereas in mid-nineteenth-century Britain, Britishness was no longer necessarily equivalent to Anglicanism.

The nationalists endeavoured to rationalize and classicize tradition in order to fashion it into a modern Indian identity, where the term 'modern' was not equivalent to 'Western'. It was a process of partial secularization of Hindu tradition. This rationalization of tradition, on the part of Bengali nationalists at least, was in part an attempt to construct a Hindu identity for the Hindus as distinct from the identity of the colonizer, and which meant a self-consciousness of Hindu traditions, beliefs and customs. Self-consciousness of their Hinduness prompted nationalists to selectively appropriate and refurbish certain traditions and historical events, while discarding others as inappropriate or 'backward' and constraining. Thus early Hindu nationalism is shown by Chatterjee to be a selection of traditions and events deemed to be most 'representative' and most 'innately' Hindu.

The development of secular nationalism

A shift in the conception of national identity occurred within the nationalist movement, according to the historian Gyan Pandey, between the 1920s and 1930s. The difference between the first and the second stage involved a passage from the rationalization of Hindu tradition as a distinctive trait of Indian identity to the development of a secular or non-sectarian nationalism (though it is interesting to note that the Jan Sangh, the BJP's parent body, was established in 1925). Gandhi was instrumental in making the nationalist movement inter-religious, both in his writings, most notably in his 1909 nationalist tract *Hind Swaraj*, and in his political practice, with his support of the Khilafat movement among Indian Muslims. The early nationalists collapsed religion and culture, and ultimately identified an Indian cultural essence with a Hindu cultural essence. In the later nationalist period, thanks to Gandhi and then to Nehru, Indian cultural distinctiveness began to be premised on notions of an absorptive and syncretic civilization which assimilated many different religious and cultural influences – Mughal–Muslim, Parsi, Christian, etc. – while retaining its 'innate' character. But Indianness was no longer equated with Hinduism, and religion as a distinctive marker of difference from the colonizer began to be substituted by a more secular conception of Indian culture. The writings of Nehru on religion and nationalism bear this idea out, as we shall see further on. Gandhi's *Hind Swaraj* forcefully and very influentially proposed a more inclusive form of nationalism already in 1909. Gandhi affirmed that 'India cannot cease to be one nation because people belonging to different religions live in it', citing India's faculty for assimilation as a necessary condition for a unified sense of nationality (Gandhi 1997: 52). For him,

> those who are conscious of the spirit of nationality do not interfere with one another's religion. If they do so, they are not fit to be considered a nation.... In no part of the world are one nationality and one religion synonymous terms: nor has it ever been so in India.
>
> (Gandhi 1997: 52–3)

From the 1920s onwards, the nationalists strove towards the construction of a secular ideal of the nation, beyond the 'divisive' claims of religion, caste, community, or region. As Gandhi said in 1922, 'Nationalism is greater than sectarianism … In that sense we are Indians first and Hindus, Mussalmans, Parsis, Christians after' (Gandhi in Pandey 1992: 238). Gandhi thought that the 'non-essentials' of religion, i.e. the more exterior forms of Hindu and Muslim religious practice, for example, the 'sin' of untouchability, should be discarded in favour of a larger national unity (Pandey 1992: 237). For Pandey what was most striking about this process of secularization of nationalism was this

> call to privatize religion (the separation of religion from politics, as we would put it today), the dissociation of the 'nation' from any pre-existing communities

> and the construction of the purely national unambiguously, in terms of a new kind of community – the 'India of our dreams'.
>
> (Pandey 1992: 239)

Yet in the history of the nationalist movement, there is no linear evolution from community to nation in the sense of an abandonment of preceding local, caste, religious, communal loyalties for a secular nationalist ideal – the country – which lay beyond these 'divisive' allegiances. The 'backward' and 'primitive' spectre of communalism persisted, despite all the efforts of the nationalists to discredit it. The difficulty the nationalist movement had in dealing with sectarian strife was ultimately the catalyst for the Partition of the subcontinent. There was also a lack of understanding on the part of Indian nationalist leaders of the Muslims' fear that the Congress, composed as it was primarily of Hindus, would not serve the interests of their community, and indeed would marginalize them completely in the new state. Hence secularization in India coexisted and still coexists uneasily with 'communalism', and indeed, some like Ashis Nandy would argue, they represent two faces of the same coin. The theories of secular nationalism and the subsequent historical explanations it gave for the tragedy of Partition reveal the gaps between its ideals and its practice, which ultimately failed to account for the driving force of 'communalism' in the subcontinent.

The evolution of Indian nationalist discourse shows that, unlike secularization in Britain, in India there was no comparable quarantining of religion from politics, and of religious identity from national identity, though the efforts of secular nationalists like Nehru strove to achieve this separation, both in theory and in practice. There is a clear link between this detachment of religious identity from national identity in Britain and the European construction of the subject as split between a public and private self. European nationalism developed a discourse of citizenship and the rights of the individual in the public sphere whose counterpoint was the ideology of individualism in the private sphere. But when the idea of nationalism took hold in India, it was radically transformed, and most notably in the construction of the self vis-à-vis the nation.[13]

According to Chakrabarty, national identity in India did not evolve out of the split between public and private self the way it did in Europe. Both Gandhi and Nehru tended to conceive of the imagined political community in terms of citizens, i.e. individuals making up the nation-state, rather than of *communities* making up the nation-state. Indeed, even though Gandhi's worldview was essentially religious, his focus was always on the individual, and on self-improvement or self-rule (*swaraj*). The Congress's field of work was to be purely national, and the question of religious and caste rights should have no place in it.

This narrative of the nation saw it as a transcendent ideal whose essential unity the nationalist elite had grasped, but which remained 'undiscovered' by the majority of the common people.[14] But such a narrative left no room for

> an accommodation of local loyalties, for continued attachment to religion, or even appreciation of the vigorous struggles that had been waged against these:

> nor much allowance for the class-divided and regionally diverse perceptions of the 'imagined community', out of the struggle for which Indian nationalism and the Indian national movement arose.
>
> (Pandey 1992: 253)

Thus the Congress leaders such as Nehru ended up adopting a statist perspective on the nation which did not admit alternative narratives of the relationship between the people and their imagined political community. These alternative visions of India, such as those premised on a religious basis, had been labelled as communalist, i.e. the opposite of 'truly' nationalist, since the early 1920s. Religion, in the nationalist vision, was to be subordinated to the claims of nationalism, much as it had been in the process of historical secularization in Britain.

It is of course undeniable that Gandhi effectively mobilized mass participation in the independence movement through the deployment of religious concepts and symbols, albeit made flexible to accommodate the participation from different religious communities. Gandhian nationalism, it should be said, cannot really be called secular since it sprang from a call to return to the roots of Indian civilization, and most notably to religion. In *Hind Swaraj*, but also in his later nationalist writings, Gandhi advocates a return to religion as an ethical system and as a way to reconstruct Indian civilization against the negative influence of Western civilization. Writing in 1909, Gandhi says: 'Religion is dear to me, and my first complaint is that India is becoming irreligious. Here I am not thinking of the Hindu, the Mahomedan, or the Zoroastrian religion, but of that religion which underlies all religions. We are turning away from God' (Gandhi 1997: 42). His is a syncretic religion that allows for the inclusion of all systems of belief extant in India, and which draws much from Tolstoy's reconceptualization of Christianity as an ethical system rather than as a revealed faith. By contrast, the subordination of religion to the claims of nationalism, which characterized state secularism after 1947, is very much a product of Nehru's rationalistic and scientific ideological background. Both Seth and Rushdie are direct inheritors of Nehru's rationalist legacy, while significantly, Gandhi's utopian, collectivist and *religious* political vision, which involves a critique of modern civilization as it was imported into India and a rejection of historicism, rationality and the scientific mode of knowledge that other nationalist writers endorsed, does not appear in either of their novels. An example of a Gandhian novel is Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* (1938), which presents a religious imagining of the national community through a village microcosm. The village setting is chosen by Rao presumably because Gandhi's political vision advocated a return to village life, and the conviction that national regeneration had to start in the villages. The novel represents very well the way Gandhism did not repudiate religion, but rather, from within a theocratic framework, it sought to transform the mentality of 'traditional' India towards untouchability and caste barriers. Ultimately, however, the village is destroyed by the advent of anti-colonial struggle, an ending that would seem to emphasize the utopianism of Gandhi's project.

The genealogy I have suggested for the contemporary Indian English novel, stemming from Nehruvian secular nationalism rather than Gandhian religious nationalism, has also much to do with the different idioms adopted by Gandhi and Nehru in their writings and political practice. Gandhi considered it essential to do away with English education and for everyone to learn Indian languages (with Hindustani as a national language), and this was connected to his non-sectarian ideal.

> Religious, that is, ethical education, will occupy the first place. Every cultured Indian will know in addition to his own provincial language, if a Hindu, Sanskrit; if a Mahomedan, Arabic; if a Parsee, Persian; and all Hindi. Some Hindus should know Arabic and Persian; some Mohamedans and Parsees, Sanskrit… . A universal language for India should be Hindi, with the option of writing it in Persian or Nagri characters … All this is necessary for us slaves. Through our slavery the nation has been enslaved, and will be free with our freedom.
>
> (Gandhi 1997: 105–6)

Gandhi's emphasis on 'Hindustani' was in distinct contrast with Nehru's ease with and preference for English. For Gandhi, English was connected with another pernicious imperial enterprise, historical writing, which according to him imposed a fallacious and mystificatory view of Indians' pasts to Indians. If Indians did not wish to misunderstand things, then they should return to Hindu and Muslim scriptures as the basis for the truth about themselves (Gandhi 1997: 56). This anti-historical view of national identity is at complete odds with Nehru's pronounced historicist bent in his nationalist writing, most notably *The Discovery of India*, and in the later historical novels analysed here.

Around 1945, it was becoming all too clear how Gandhi's and Nehru's political visions for the nation diverged, as is testified by a famous exchange of letters between the two men. Gandhi's decision to write to Nehru in Hindustani is deliberately stated at the beginning of his letter to him, as if to mark his distance from Nehruvian modernity through linguistic difference. Hindi is the language in which Gandhi envisions his village republic: if

> India is to attain true freedom and through India the world also, then sooner or later the fact must be recognized that people will have to live in villages, not in towns … Crores of people will never be able to live at peace with each other in towns and palaces. They will then have no recourse but to resort to both violence and untruth.
>
> (Gandhi 1997: 150)

Gandhi acknowledged that 'the village of my dreams is still in my mind'. Nehru, in his reply to Gandhi, was sceptical as to why villages 'should necessarily embody truth and non-violence'; 'a village, normally speaking, is backward intellectually

and culturally and no progress has been made from a backward environment' (Gandhi 1997: 152). He also emphasized that Gandhi's vision in *Hind Swaraj* had never been considered or adopted by the Congress as a concrete political strategy (Gandhi 1997: 153). There is a clear difference in the way in which Gandhi and Nehru use the words 'progress' and 'improvement'. For Nehru these words signified scientific and technical advancement, and were connected with the importance of industrialization for India. 'I do not think it is possible for India to be really independent unless she is a technically advanced country' (Nehru in Gandhi 1997: 153).

I would argue that Nehruvian ideas about modernity, rather than Gandhian ones, are constitutive of subsequent Anglophone narratives about the Indian nation, especially Rushdie and Seth's fictions, and also of their distinct class character. The main difference between Gandhi and Nehru was in their attitude towards the state, and in particular the developmental state. Gandhi equated the state with violence, and believed it also 'fostered a statist manner of thinking and appropriated man's moral and social powers' (Parekh 1989: 111). The state prevented men from fully exercising their will. 'I look upon an increase of the power of the state with the greatest fear, because, although while apparently doing good by minimizing exploitation, it does the greatest harm to mankind by destroying individuality, which lies at the root of all progress' (Gandhi 1935: 413).[15] While Rushdie is often critical of the state, his critique seems to be more about the failed possibilities of the Indian nation-state rather than a critique of state formation per se. Seth's statist and developmentalist view of India of course bears no trace of Gandhi's radical rejection of the state. In a very profound sense, these novelists are Nehru's children: constitutionally incapable of envisioning India outside of a modern state formation, outside of an urban environment, or within a religious frame of mind. Nehru's rationalist legacy is still very much with them.

Nehru's rationalist secularism

Nehru's writing on nationalism clearly demonstrates a rationalist and individualistic approach to religion. He provides us with a good working definition of a 'rational' or 'transcendent' secularism. In his teleological view of the development of the Indian nation-state, Nehru says that the religious outlook on life, so pervasive in the subcontinent, must gradually be phased out and relegated to the private sphere. Indeed, religion is seen by Nehru as a major cause of delay for India's development:

> The belief in a supernatural agency which ordains everything has led to a certain irresponsibility on the social plane, and emotion and sentimentality have taken the place of reasoned thought and inquiry. Religion, though it has undoubtedly brought comfort to innumerable human beings and stabilized society by its values, has checked the tendency to change and progress inherent in human society.
>
> (Nehru 1946: 524)

Elsewhere Nehru, in identifying secularism as the only approach which will guarantee the development of a truly integrated nation, says that it does not mean 'absence of religion, but putting religion on a different plane from that of normal political and social life. Any other approach in India would mean the breaking up of India' (Nehru 1980: 331). However, for Nehru, putting religion on a different plane from political and social life implies a subordination of religion to reason. It is clear from Nehru's writing that he is a rationalist; he concedes faith may have some value for an individual in a very general, almost abstract sense, and he groups religious faith into an undifferentiated category together with any belief in a higher ideal in life.[16] But only knowledge can yield a true emancipation of the spirit, thereby shrinking the domain of religion 'in the narrow sense of the word'. His praise of the scientific approach extends far beyond the material domain and invests every aspect of life:

> It is the scientific approach, the adventurous and yet critical temper of science, the search for truth and new knowledge, the refusal to accept anything without testing and trial, the capacity to change previous conclusions in the face of new evidence, the reliance on observed fact and not on preconceived theory, the hard discipline of the mind – all this is necessary, not merely for the application of science but for life itself and the solution of its many problems.
>
> (Nehru 1946: 525)

The scientific approach is conceived as directly opposed to the 'narrowly' religious one, which relies on emotion and intuition, and produces 'narrowness and intolerance, credulity and superstition, emotionalism and irrationalism. It tends to close and limit the mind of man, and to produce a temper of a dependent, unfree person' (Nehru 1946: 526). Nehru could not see religion as a renewing force in society, since he identified it with backwardness and reactionary positions. In this he was profoundly at odds with the radical religious message of Gandhi, who felt that only through a recuperation of religion could India attain a true emancipation from the colonizer, or more precisely, from the corrupting influence of Western civilization. Nehru's writing is useful to define the contours of transcendent or rationalist secularism, especially in the Indian context, but not exclusively. Rationalist secularism is the prevalence of a scientific temper, a rationalization of the worldview of the individual, and the reduction of religious belief to 'sentiment and affect', in Viswanathan's words. This shrinking of religion into sentiment and affect characterizes many secularized societies. The legal definition of blasphemy in Western societies is a case in point. Viswanathan contends that blasphemy nowadays, in Western societies, is more a discourse of rights than of creed or belief. This is a reflection of the extent to which culture has usurped the function of religion; religious difference, in modern multicultural societies like Britain, is defended only because it signifies *cultural* difference:

> The sympathy for 'wounded sentiments' is a permissible secular gesture that has the special virtue of not pandering to the religious absolutism on

> which those sentiments may be based. If tolerance is obliged to protect the rights of all communities, its privileging of the subjectivity of sentiment over the objectivity of creed steers clear of antiheretical presumptions while still holding fast to the ideal of cultural relativism.
>
> (Viswanathan 1998: 251)

The substitution of religion with an idea of national culture was also effected by Nehru, where the distinctiveness of the spiritual domain was no longer defined by the *Hindu religion* as with the nineteenth-century Hindu nationalists, but by *Indian culture*: 'Nationalism is essentially a group memory of past achievements, traditions, and experiences, and nationalism is stronger today than it has ever been' (Nehru 1946: 528). But Gandhi presents a powerful example of the way in which a national culture could be reconceived along religious lines without an exclusivist or communalist agenda. Gandhi's 'genuinely plural view of India' was indissociable from a religious sensibility, though his underlying worldview remained steadfastly Hindu in its conception (Parekh 1989: 189). A later generation of Indian theorists would embark on a wholesale critique of Nehruvian secularism, offering different interpretations of why it had failed as a political and ideological strategy for postcolonial India. Critiques of the Indian state emerge most strongly after 1975, coinciding with the Emergency, seen as a definitive breakdown in the secular consensus and in the faith in the political leadership of the country. *Midnight's Children,* as one of the first major satires of the Emergency years, can be considered as forming part of this critique by social theorists and historians.

Critiques of Nehruvian secularism

Subrata Mitra argues that, to a large extent, Nehru's effort to keep religion out of the public sphere was unsuccessful. In India, modernization and secularization have worked at cross purposes. Though 'India is virtually alone among the post-colonial states in Asia to have adopted religious neutrality as a key feature of its Constitution and the cornerstone of the strategy for nation-building', yet this secular stance has not brought about a progressive secularization of society, quite the contrary: it has brought religion to the fore, as the success of the BJP has demonstrated (Mitra 1999: 91). Mitra attributes this to the fact that Nehru's secularist zeal went hand in hand with his determination to lay solid democratic foundations for the Indian state. Thus secularization could not be achieved with strong-arm methods as in case of the USSR, a non-democratic state (Mitra 1999: 98). Indeed, the defining word 'secular' for the Indian republic was only added to the Constitution during the Emergency, in 1976.

For Ashis Nandy, ideas of the nation-state and nationalism are important factors in outbreaks of communal violence (such as, for example, the language riots in Maharashtra recounted in *Midnight's Children*), because these ideas have reduced the range of options within Indian public life. Thus ethnic demands perceived to be outside the range of 'normal' politics are coercively contained by the state: 'This in turn leads to deeper communal divides and to the perception of the state

as essentially hostile to the interests of the aggrieved communities' (Nandy 1998: 20). Indian secularism, given its strong statist connections, thus emerges as a part of the communal disease.

The problem, as Nandy sees it, is that secularism conceived in rationalistic terms tends to reduce belief to mere ideology, and in a society like India, such a reduction fails to address the pervasiveness of the religious worldview among the population, and its inevitable intersections with conceptions of political community. Here Nandy elaborates Gandhian ideas about religion in *Hind Swaraj*. In this text, Gandhi distinguished between 'religion as organization' and 'religion as ethics and spirituality' (Parel in Gandhi 1997: p. liv). Nandy develops this distinction, which was crucial to Gandhi's articulation of a non-sectarian nationalism, into religion-as-faith as separate from religion-as-ideology. By faith he means religion as 'a way of life, a tradition that is definitionally non-monolithic and operationally plural'. By ideology he means religion as 'a subnational, national, or cross-national identifier of populations contesting for or protecting non-religious interests like political or socio-economic ones' (Nandy 1998: 322). Modern or rational secularists conceive of religion only in terms of ideology, without taking it into account as a way of life for many people. Nandy links modern Indian secularism with the idea of the modern concept of selfhood acquired partly from the Western Enlightenment, as a 'well-bounded, individuated entity' (Nandy 1998: 325). On the other hand, religion-as-belief is intimately linked with the way the self is conceptualized in South Asia. The self in South Asian cultures is much more fluid than the Western notion of selfhood: it 'can be conceptually viewed as a configuration of selves' and 'simultaneously shapes, invokes and reflects the configurative principles of religions-as-faiths' (Nandy 1998: 325). Nandy argues that much of today's fanaticism and violence stems from a sense of defeat, impotency and self-hatred on the part of believers who realize that their world is becoming increasingly secular. Religion-as-faith, to adopt Nandy's terminology, goes far beyond mere ideology and is equivalent to a lifeworld which presents a discursive break from the rationalist argumentations of transcendent secularism. Nandy's anti-secular stance is derived from the 'alternative modernity' for India which Gandhi strived for, premised on a profoundly religious view of the world. Modern civilization needs to be uprooted and a return to 'true religion' is absolutely necessary. 'When its full effect is realized, we will see that religious superstition is harmless compared to that of modern civilization' (Gandhi 1997: 43). Gandhi felt that it was precisely the secularization of Indian society which had led to its enslavement under British rule. Like Frantz Fanon, Gandhi realized that colonialism was a powerful act of psychological manipulation and indoctrination, and that the way to rid oneself of the colonizer was to undertake a radical cultural and ideological renewal; focus of the change is the self and the psyche, which will then bring about the outer project of transformation. Merely changing the external conditions, i.e. substituting one class of rulers with another, would not change Indians' fundamental condition of enslavement. Gandhi's 'religious secularism', if we can call it that, was based on a non-violent idea of tolerance. His appeal to tolerance was mainly aimed at the Hindus; given that they were the majority community, they should be making

the utmost efforts to reach out towards the Muslims who felt threatened by their numerical superiority. He suggests a novel way to deal with sectarian violence, i.e. through *satyagraha*, or passive resistance. The offer of self-sacrifice, or 'making a vow', is the only way to stop offences towards the other religion: 'the object of taking a vow is speedily to bring about, by the power of self-denial, a state of things which can only be expected to come in the fulness of time' (Gandhi 1993 [1919]: 259). He says that if Hindus want to stop cow-slaughter by Muslims on religious festivals such as Id, they should offer to sacrifice themselves, and he is sure that Muslims would not kill the cow in that case:

> this is satyagraha, this is equity; even as, if I want my brother to redress a grievance, I must do so by taking upon my head a certain amount of sacrifice and not by inflicting injury on him. I may not demand it as of right. My only right against my brother is that I can offer myself as a sacrifice.
>
> (Gandhi 1993 [1919]: 260)

Thus Gandhi does away with any notion of 'right' attached to the majority community, i.e. Hinduism. But equally he proposes a way of dealing with sectarian strife that is South Asian in origin, and probably familiar to Hindus and Muslims, because it harks back to religious principles, i.e. through *satyagraha* and the idea of doing one's duty by one's brother. It is important to recall the way in which Gandhi fashions an inclusive and pluralistic view of Indian society, from a non-secular perspective, if only to remind ourselves (as secularized subjects) that religion is not only dogmatic or fanatical, but is characterized by diverse positions, accommodation and tolerance as much as the modern 'faith' of secularism. As Leela Gandhi notes,

> once we concede the varieties in religious experience, the metaphysical may often prove to have much more in common with those questions of multiculturalism, pluralism, and complex equality which constitute the positive ethical preoccupation of our own time, and much less in common with the 'fundamentalisms' and 'extremisms' that we fear.
>
> (Gandhi 2006: 141)

Leela Gandhi and perhaps Gandhi himself seem to be suggesting that religiosity has been actively discounted in the construction of a secular ethical subject in the contemporary polity, as these novels under discussion demonstrate. This may be one reason why the secular aspect of the Indian novel in English is so readily identified with an elite stance or voice, as is argued by Tabish Khair, with the consequent elision of subaltern discourse. The secular position, implicitly based on Nehru's 'modernizing' view of the postcolonial Indian subject, does not easily open a dialogue with a subaltern worldview that often articulates its narratives in the regional languages and from a religious perspective. However, the novels under discussion occasionally present openings of this type, in which subaltern

perspectives are incorporated within the novelistic discourse, with varying degrees of success.

What I propose to outline in the following section is a 'radical' idea of secularism, that attempts to go beyond some of the aporias presented by rationalist secularism, and without the total 'resurrection' of a religious worldview as envisioned by Gandhi. I articulate this notion of radical secularism, in connection with the idea of a 'secular criticism' as an anti-totalizing intellectual activity. The secular critic can attempt to mediate between secular and religious identity, a task of especial urgency in a postcolonial society like India. Leela Gandhi points out how 'our conception of the "political" or "ethical" is in many ways hopelessly circumscribed by the secular, rational calculations which underscore the movement of modern European thought – from "Europe" out into the (post)colonial world' (Gandhi 2006: 116). What is needed is a different engagement with the hybrid postcolonial subject that does not close off a dialogue with religion, but allows an opening up, to the spiritual and the metaphysical.

Secular criticism

For Edward Said, both culture and religion furnish society with systems of authority and canons of order that wish to compel adherence and a blind submission to their 'faith', whether a religious or a cultural set of beliefs. The role of the critic, in this case, is to question this affiliative order, by assuming a sceptical and secular stance to the system of culture, and to situate literature in the political, historical, social context of its production, in order to demystify its supposedly 'universal' values (Said 1983: 26). Said identifies 'ironic' and 'oppositional' as the two words that would best describe secular criticism. The critic, therefore, is the radically doubting sceptic of any totalizing system of belief. For Aamir Mufti, Saidian secular criticism is suspicious both of religion and what has become the 'new' religion in the present geopolitical context, the nation, often conflated with religion as such. Secular criticism seeks to dismantle the certainties of nationalism that have become like dogmas binding a certain set of believers, namely the national community.

In endorsing secular criticism, one needs to refute the charge levelled at it by Ashis Nandy among others, that it is elitist. Of course there is an important tradition of equating secularism with rationalism, but then not all secularisms are formally equivalent. There can be a form of secularism which is not merely a rehearsal of rationalist arguments about the subordination of all other worldviews to reason. The type of secularism proposed by Said and by Aamir Mufti is enunciated from *minority* positions. Secular as a term is no longer to be opposed to religion per se (or religion-as-ideology, as Nandy would have it), but to nationalism, 'a critique of the "assurance", "confidence", and "majority sense" that claims on behalf of national culture always imply' (Mufti 1998: 107). Thus Said's use of the term (and even more strongly, Mufti's) use of the term 'secular' is catachrestic, namely a meaningful and productive *mis*use:

> It is an invitation to rethink, from within the postcolonial present, the narrative of progress that underlies the very notion of secularization. It carries the insight that nationalism does not represent a mere transcending of religious difference … but rather its reorientation and reinscription along national lines.
>
> (Mufti 1998: 107)

Said's notion of secular criticism is strongly linked with the image of critical activity as the breaking of idols. But this critical posture is not merely a naïve trust in the traditions of Enlightenment as demystification; rather, 'the relationship of Said's critical practice to the Enlightenment is dialectical' (Mufti 1998: 111–12). Thus Said's position cannot be simply identified with humanism. The secular critical consciousness must continuously maintain a scepticism about the transparency of Enlightenment claims to emancipation, without disallowing its possibility. Secular criticism does not imply the rejection of universalism per se:

> It implies a scrupulous recognition that all claims of a universal nature are particular claims. Furthermore, and most importantly, it means rescuing the marginalized perspective of the minority as one from which to rethink and remake universalist (ethical, political, cultural) claims, thus displacing its assignation as the site of the local.
>
> (Mufti 1998: 112)

Culture, having been substituted for religion as a knowledge-producing activity in the modern world, has inherited its authoritarian mode of disciplining knowledge. Secular criticism, for its part,

> compels a recognition of both culture and religion as systems of authority that operate in parallel ways to establish criteria for membership, command allegiance, and substitute shared values for individual critical consciousness.
>
> (Viswanathan 1998: 45)

Scepticism and questioning are considered heresies in a religious order, but it is striking 'how readily cultural criticism acquires a heretical cast, even in a supposedly secular climate, wherever revered cultural icons are challenged'. Secular criticism seeks to recover the oppositional quality of contemporary scholarship from the 'guild mentality that enjoins unreflecting obedience to abstract notions like "nation", "community", "culture", "citizen", and the like' (Viswanathan 1998: 46).

The question of minority identity is linked to the exercise of a secular criticism. One may be both a member of a minority group or religious sect *and* a member of a national collectivity, and this often produces a tension:

> Said's larger point, as I understand it, is that what is often at stake in dissent is resisting the transformation of criticism into either an act of citizenship

– a performative gesture of citizenship in a self-selecting guild – or an act of withdrawal into a self-enclosed space of particularism or separatism.

(Viswanathan 1998: 46)

The secular critic, speaking from a minority position in society, must avoid slipping into a sectarian mode while simultaneously resisting a citizenship function. In other words, s/he must mediate effectively between religious and national identity.

The role of the secular critic in mediating between religious and nationalist identity acquires an especial urgency in a postcolonial society like India. Indian state secularism is essentially premised on a rationalist framework that subordinated religion to reason. But for Mufti it is also a *majoritarian* secularism, in the sense that Indian secular nationalism as articulated by Nehru conceived of a state which must *tolerate* its minorities (in this sense it is majoritarian). The Pakistani Constitution guarantees protection to minorities using an inclusionary idiom that recalls that of the Indian Constitution. Both Indian and Pakistani nationalism have majoritarian premises, which can be linked to the colonial system of religious enumeration. Ayesha Jalal remarks that 'while Indian nationalism asserts its inclusionary idioms in the secular garb and Pakistani nationalism in an inclusionary religious mode, neither avoids the pernicious process of exclusion resulting from the implicit denial of difference' (Jalal 1997: 100–2). Similarly, Nandy's concept of tolerance, though articulated from a *religious* rather than secular standpoint, is also majoritarian.[17] Both Nehru and Nandy recuperate the notion of cultural syncretism as an indigenous form of tolerance and coexistence, though at the basis of the former is religion and at the basis of the latter is rationalism. But ultimately syncretism does not solve the problem of the relationship between majority and minority in modern political life; ultimately, the plurality of traditions in India are 'unequally authorized', in other words the power imbalance is ingrained in social relations.

Both Nandy and Nehru are guilty of conceiving of Indian culture exclusively as *Indic*, which absorbed Muslim religion and culture over the centuries and gradually Indianized it. This cultural perspective is still indubitably majoritarian, since it is 'incapable of seeing minority itself as a means of disrupting the majoritarian definitions of nation and state, as a site for the possible enunciation of secular claims upon state and society' (Mufti 1998: 116). But I think that Mufti is too quick to collapse rational (Nehruvian) and religious (Gandhian) notions of non-sectarianism into a 'majoritarian' secularism, putatively unable to understand the minoritarian perspective. Nehruvian secularism as a political practice successfully kept a very volatile polity together after the trauma of Partition, and did its utmost to protect minority rights, even to the point of enshrining them in the Constitution, in contradiction to its supposed establishment of the liberal secular subject (see earlier discussion on the Civil Code).

It is also important to deconstruct tolerance, in the context of the relationship between majority and minority. The notion of tolerance is at the basis of any formulation of a majoritarian secularism, but in the very notion of tolerance there is something intolerable. It implies a liberty to not tolerate, and the implication of an inherent inequality in a society where tolerance is exercised:

> when the majority speaks of tolerance, one should identify it as a 'majority position' that is closed to the power differentials in a heterogeneous society, where tolerance is often the privilege of a dominant culture.
>
> (Viswanathan 1998: 253)

In liberal political thought, tolerance is seen as a *liberty* and not a *right*; whereas a liberty is a 'general capacity, socially protected, to perform or not perform in certain ways', a right 'is basically a moral *claim* (which may of course be legally codified) the object of which is normally regarded as a positive good, which should or must be secured or protected' (King 1976: 24). Since tolerance is not of itself a right, but a liberty, it does not necessarily have any moral claim to exist. The exercise of tolerance is merely an unhappy consequence of the fact that inequality is a chronic element of contemporary society; inequality will have been eliminated when tolerance can be done away with (King 1976: 24). The way Nandy would have it, tolerance is an ideal; whereas its origin is rooted in inequality. Tolerance, therefore, is characteristic of a majoritarian secularism that it is urgent to deconstruct in order to redefine the relationship between minority and majority in the South Asian context; with specific reference to the Muslim minority versus the Hindu majority. However, Gandhi would argue that tolerance is not a liberty, but a *duty*; he emphasizes that it is the majority community who should make most allowances, and sacrifices: 'till … communal jealousies or preferences become a thing of the past, minorities who suspect the motives of majorities must be allowed their way. The majority must set the example of self-sacrifice' (Gandhi 1993 [1924]: 267). Thus Gandhi argues for a radical rethinking of the notion of tolerance in the light of *ahimsa* (non-violence) and *satyagraha*; in order to avoid communal bloodshed, the majority community must exercise self-control and self-discipline and make concessions to the minority. For example, during the riots immediately preceding Partition that occurred in West Bengal, Gandhi undertook fasting as a way to curb communal violence. Obviously, Gandhi's proposal is radical and utopian, premised on the revolution of the self of Gandhian doctrine; and he was a martyr to his own cause, since he was killed by a Hindu right-wing nationalist who disapproved of his stance towards Muslims.

But our concern is more with the faultlines of Indian secular nationalism *after* Independence and Partition. What secular nationalism effectively did to a significant part of the Indian population (the part which then became Pakistani citizens) was to turn them into non-Indians (and today the propaganda of the Hindu right attempts to depict Indian Muslims as 'non-Indians'). The task of critical scholarship today is to provide a conceptual framework for the rethinking of India in which 'Muslim' does not function as a minority. The obverse of this critical imperative is that Pakistan be recognized as an *Indian* – and not merely as a South Asian – polity. The task of secular criticism then is to deconstruct terms like Hindu and Muslim, majority and minority, Indian and Pakistani, citizen and alien, and to reveal the unfinished nature of this normalization operated by the state.

'Minority' is a fundamental category of liberal secular society. It can and should become the privileged position from which to rethink universalist categories. Radical secularism – a 'minoritarian' critical stance – critiques both rationalist and majoritarian forms of secularism from a minority position. Said allows for the claims of secularism in the postcolonial world to be formulated in terms of the *contingent* demands of peace and justice, rather than drawing sustenance from a putatively universal Reason. This does not imply rejecting 'reason' *tout court*: being secular today in a postcolonial context means 'elaborating the bases of this formulation and the contours of this contingency, rather than succumbing to an undialectical rejection of Enlightenment as (colonial) domination' (Mufti 1998: 121). Since culture in modern times has taken over the moral purposes of religion in a civil society, then the task of the secular critic is to challenge the prevailing orthodoxies of culture.

Thus secular criticism proposes a notion of secularism which claims a different genealogy from any form of rationalist transcendence. But it is not completely clear how it can provide a sufficiently convincing epistemological framework for coming to a better understanding of the truth-claims of lifeworlds which are radically different, even opposed, to a rationalist secular vision, without subsuming them into this vision, or slipping into a freewheeling cultural relativism. How can one allow for the validity of religious belief in the modern age without either reducing it to sentiment and affect or accepting it simply by virtue of its cultural difference, thus implicitly not engaging with it? Elaborating a properly responsible form of secularism must take the necessity of a 'universal community of communication' into account as well (Krieger 1990: 231).

Translation and conversion

In my view, the novel genre, more than other forms of writing, enables the possibility of a universal community of communication, as it performs the function of bridging gaps between worldviews, while simultaneously representing their radical discontinuity. Potentially present in the novel form are possible modes of communication between different worldviews, namely conversion, translation and dialogism. Conversion is a key notion for the possibility of global thinking in a radically pluralistic world and a postmodern context (Krieger 1990: 223). This is a *methodological* conversion, as opposed to the exclusive and apologetic *confessional* conversion. As an epistemological concept, methodological conversion can be used in two ways at once. On the one hand, it can do justice to the radical discontinuity of knowledge. On the other hand, a methodological conversion model allows us to conceive the continuity of knowledge in such a way as to open a space for an 'unlimited community of communication' which is not imperialist. Ideology and faith are replaced with a notion of 'cultural metanarratives', where 'the *meaning* rather than validity of truth claims is foregrounded' (Viswanathan 1998: 174). Conversion is a conceptual means by which the gaps between different cultural metanarratives might be bridged. Given the lack of a metalanguage which can negotiate between conflicting paradigms espoused by different faiths,

> [t]he only possible form of negotiation is one that entails a transition, or a *conversion*, from one paradigm to another. Indeed, the process of transition between worldviews emerges, in contexts of pluralism, as the only credible form of negotiation. If discourse beyond the level of argumentation is to materialize, it cannot be grounded in a unitary worldview or religion but rather in the ability to move *between* worldviews.
>
> (Viswanathan 1998: 175)

Thus methodological conversion emerges as an 'intersubjective, transitional, and transactional mode of negotiation between two otherwise irreconcilable worldviews' (Viswanathan 1998: 176). The novel allows the reader to inhabit and identify different subject-positions – effectively, to convert, temporarily, to a character's language and way of thinking. In this sense the novel has the potential to be a radically secular genre.

Translation, like conversion, is a way of negotiating between conflicting religious/secular paradigms. The concept of transcendent secularism can be conceived as a metalanguage, which translates between different languages and the 'higher' language of science itself. However, translation from various languages into a positivist superior idiom encounters grave difficulties when confronted with translations between divergent religious paradigms:

> So it could be said that although the sciences signify some kind of sameness in our understanding of the world across cultures, the gods signify differences … Writing about the presence of gods and spirits in the secular language of history or sociology would therefore be like translating into a universal language that which belongs to a field of differences.
>
> (Chakrabarty 2000: 76)

The impossibility of effecting a complete translation of different worldviews into the metalanguage of reason does not mean embracing cultural relativism. To think in terms of singularities is *not* to make a claim against the permeability of cultures and languages: 'It is, in fact, to appeal to models of cross-cultural and cross-categorical translations that do not take a universal middle term for granted' (Chakrabarty 2000: 83). The point about translation between lifeworlds is that it is to be conceived as a *barter*, rather than an exchange of commodities; so that when poets translate between Hindu and Muslim gods using the expression 'supreme God', this does not function as a scientific third term: 'they are translations in which codes are switched locally, without going through a universal set of rules' (Chakrabarty 2000: 86). Translation as a negotiation between worldviews functions as a barter, as a one-for-one exchange, which must be negotiated every time. There is no easy shortcut. The rules governing translation from one religious paradigm to another (or from one religious language to another) cannot acquire the 'universality' of scientific discourse – there is no abstract category called 'religion'. Translation resembles conversion as a mode of negotiation between lifeworlds, because it does not definitively renounce the possibility of a global thinking, and

yet does not rely on an overarching universal reason to effect this bridge between 'cultural metanarratives' such as rationalist secularism and religious belief. The sphere of the literary should be seen as a very important locus of translation today, where religious and rationalist idioms are juxtaposed, without being subsumed into a universalizing metalanguage. The Gandhian notion of translation premised on a religious perspective is relevant to an understanding of how literature works, where effectively a suspension of disbelief is enacted. His syncretic notion of religion drew from a number of different spiritual traditions, including Tolstoy's notion of Christianity, theosophy and a radical reconceptualization of Hindu scriptures. Bhikhu Parekh outlines how

> since the universe was for [Gandhi] eternal, the question was not one of creating, but of ordering and structuring it. Gandhi's was basically a non-violent God holding the universe together by means of love which Gandhi saw at work in the forces of gravitation, mutual attraction and natural sympathy.
> (Parekh 1989: 73)

Leela Gandhi's recent recuperation of the metaphysical in relation to post-structuralist thought and the hybrid also emphasizes a different, non-rationalistic understanding of faith, in which God acts 'as guru rather than governor'. In her rereading of fin-de-siècle spiritualist texts, she interprets them as saying that God comes in many guises, and the 'alienated, authoritarian, remote, "Absolutist" deity of orthodox Christianity, standing outside of history and thus valorized in Hegelian thought, is wholly inadequate to the ethical reformation of empirical relationality' (Gandhi 2006: 134–5). She reintroduces the notion of 'risk' associated with the openness to religious experience, which seems to have been lost in the construction of the rational subject of modern ethics from Kant onwards: 'contrary to the limits (of reason, tolerance, culture, religion) which circumscribe Kantian morality, a "fiduciary" mentality offers a crucial rehearsal ground for openness, uncertainty, and inconclusiveness which must underscore any truly utopian expectation of radical inclusiveness' (Gandhi 2006: 130).

Leela Gandhi's reassessment and indeed endorsement of religion in her analysis of radical political projects at the end of the last century recalls Gandhi and his attempt to forge connections between secular politics and religious experience. The way in which he attempted to merge several religious teachings into one, and to make his faith ecumenical, was in his emphasis on conduct rather than doctrines, thus avoiding excessive dogmatism. Moreover, rather than on revelation, his concept of religion relied on an experiential understanding of it; the believer needed to undertake a spiritual journey in order to gain a closer understanding of God, rather than be 'convinced' to believe in him through some form of 'evidence'. In a way his *Autobiography* is a testimony of Gandhi's 'conversion' to his very individual and idiosyncratic form of Hinduism.

The *Autobiography* is meant, in some ways, as a conversion narrative, and its literary project shares some similarities with the ways in which postcolonial Indian fiction enables the processes of translation and conversion, though from a more

secular perspective than Gandhi's. Fiction could potentially bridge the gaps between religious lifeworlds and rationalist secularism, between the rationalist language of social science and that of religious belief.

Both translation and conversion are premised on the idea of dialogue, a defining characteristic of the novel form according to Mikhail Bakhtin. Fiction may offer the possibility of a 'universal communication' without its necessary subordination to rationalist discourse. The dialogic form of the novel stands out as a genre eminently suited for the representation of a radical pluralism of worldviews:

> The novel is an anti-authoritarian, democratizing art form which represents the multiplicity of conflict around representation in the life which it re-enacts, resisting all totalizing narratives or theories while itself being driven towards totalization by its ability to absorb and re-stage the heteroglossia of society as a whole.
>
> (Young 1996: 56)

Midnight's Children and *A Suitable Boy* are able to articulate this pluralism with regard to the articulation of secular and religious identity in the Indian context, albeit in different ways. But they might also be taken to reveal both the potentialities and the limits of novelistic dialogism as a problematic critical category. Both of the novels, as narratives of the nation in English, foreground the conflict between secular and religious identity and endorse a broadly pluralist perspective of the Indian nation-state. However *Midnight's Children* goes further in its staging of dialogism; the conflict between religious and secular identity of the nation is not resolved within its pages. *A Suitable Boy*, on the other hand, appears to be premised on a subordination of religious belief to reason in its treatment of politics and its separate strands of 'political' and 'domestic' narrative. Though its portrayal of Legislative Assembly debates provides a window as to the workings of democracy, where conflicting political and religious views are aired, the third-person omniscient narrator implicitly endorses a rationalist secularist perspective on events and ideological debates which largely coincides with Nehru's position. However, the novel form concedes a certain amount of flexibility to Seth's articulation of religious belief and its importance in Indian society by allowing the staging and intertwining of public and private narrative. Many of the characters move frequently within the two spheres; indeed an apparently 'private' character such as Maan Kapoor, whom we initially get to know through his passionate love affair with the courtesan Saeeda Bai, then becomes involved in his father's political campaigning and eventually his actions play a determining role in the result of the Brahmpur elections.

Bakhtin's work establishes why the novel is the form best suited for staging a radical pluralism of worldviews. For Bakhtin's novelistic language is a form of heteroglossia, or *raznorečie* in Russian: 'the social diversity of speech types; the internal stratification present in every language at every given moment of its historical existence is the indispensable prerequisite of the novel as a genre'

(Bakhtin 1981: 263). Bakhtin's theory of the essential dialogicity of language finds its ultimate artistic expression in the novel:

> Heteroglossia, once incorporated into the novel (whatever the forms for its incorporation) is *another's speech in another's language*, serving to express authorial intentions but in a refracted way. Such speech constitutes a special type of *double-edged discourse*. It serves two speakers at the same time and expresses simultaneously two different intentions: the direct intention of the character who's speaking, and the refracted intention of the author. In such discourse there are two voices, two meanings and two expressions … Double-voiced discourse is always internally dialogized.
>
> (Bakhtin 1981: 324)

Dostoevsky's fiction is a unique example of the possibilities for the novel's dialogism. Instead of the authorial position dominating the novel and the speeches of the characters, the differences between the characters compete without ever being concluded or resolved at the level of language, ethical life or ideology, which Bakhtin defines as 'the world views of characters understood as unresolved and unresolvable dialogue' (1981: 349). The dialogic nature of the novel form, for Bakhtin, confers on it a unique heuristic value which is not shared by the monological nature of traditional poetic forms. However, within the general dialogism assigned to the novel, Bakhtin in his work on Dostoevsky distinguished between monologic and polyphonic novels, the first type being represented by Tolstoy's novels and the second by Dostoevsky's.[18] For Bakhtin, the polyphonic novel enables the staging of contrasting and irreconcilable worldviews without falling into the trap of cultural relativism, which like dogmatism equally excludes all argumentation, all authentic dialogue, by making it either unnecessary (relativism) or impossible (dogmatism); whereas 'polyphony as an *artistic* method lies on an entirely different plane' (Bakhtin 1984: 69).

Though dialogism may offer a bridge between contrasting worldviews, it also raises serious conceptual problems. If taken to its logical conclusions, it seems to postulate the complete dissolution of the boundaries between the self and the other. There is the risk then that dialogism turns into an ultimately meaningless critical category:

> Dialogism's ubiquity is such that, as Todorov points out, logically it becomes impossible to distinguish between monologic and dialogic discourse, since all discourse is by definition dialogic, that is, maintains extra-textual relations. In the last analysis, dialogism breaks down all same/other oppositions even while it is itself predicated on them.
>
> (Young 1996: 48)

To the extent to which *Midnight's Children* and *A Suitable Boy* stage different versions of the religious/secular conflict in the Indian context, the two novels are characterized by greater or lesser degrees of polyphony. In *Midnight's Children*,

religious and rationalist voices vie for dominance, without either of the two being resolved in the other. Saleem's gift for telepathy enables him to enter minds, and he enters the mind of Nehru, who is busily hatching economic plans for India while surrounded by astrologers. In *The Satanic Verses*, the narrator may possibly be Shaitan, i.e. the devil: 'In the manner of tumbles, I yield pride of place to no personage, whether mortal or im-. From clouds to ashes, down the chimney you might say, from heavenlight to hellfire …' (Rushdie 1988: 137). Rushdie, in the latter novel, is postulating a radical dialogism in religious experience, when he presents an alternative narrative of Mohammed's revelation. But he is also presenting this alternative as a dream in the mind of one of his fictional characters, as if to underscore the fact that Islam can be seen as a 'cultural meta-narrative' that needs to be radically questioned alongside the myths of nationalism that he exploded in *Midnight's Children*. However, the impact his book had on certain national public spheres certainly served to question the 'sacral' status of the novel as a secular icon.

In *A Suitable Boy* national identity is divided into public and private dimensions. The message is clear: in the public sphere, religion is not allowed to enter. Indeed, politics, economics, and statecraft are supposed to be, ideally, the domain of rationality; and the valorization of religious belief and outright traditionalism is almost entirely consigned to the private or domestic narrative of the novel. A riot that takes place in the old part of Brahmpur, for example, is seen as an aberration, as place *outside* of what constitutes the nation; religious feelings have been allowed to enter the public sphere and disrupt it. The omniscient narrator almost constantly identifies and indeed sympathizes with the police officer in charge of subduing the riot; with the forces of law and order, and ultimately of 'reason'. The staging of religious versus secular perspectives in *A Suitable Boy* appears more monologic than in *Midnight's Children*, since in Seth's statist portrayal of India, religious views in the public sphere are portrayed as inherently dangerous and unreasonable. The link between the monologic novel and Enlightenment reason is one possible genealogy of the novel traced by Bakhtin, which he juxtaposed to the polyphonic and non-teleologic structure of Dostoevsky's work:

> Even when one is dealing with a collective, with a multiplicity of creating forces, unity is nevertheless illustrated through the image of a single consciousness: the spirit of a nation, the spirit of a people, the spirit of history and so forth … The consolidation of monologism and its permeation into all spheres and ideological life was promoted in modern times by European rationalism, with its cult of a unified and exclusive reason, and especially the Enlightenment, during which time the basic generic forms of European artistic prose took shape … This faith in the self-sufficiency of a single consciousness in all spheres of ideological life is not a theory created by some specific thinker; no, it is a profound structural characteristic of the creative ideological activity of modern times, determining all its external and internal forms.
>
> (Bakhtin 1984: 82)

So far I have delineated some of the major theoretical concepts that underlie contemporary discussions of secularism in the contemporary South Asian and postcolonial context. I link the need and the possibility of questioning and 'de-sacralizing' the rationalist premises of Nehruvian secularism to contemporary fiction by Rushdie and Seth, and the ways in which they use dialogism to present narrative voices at varying critical distance from it. It is my contention that both critical stances must be read in conjunction with one another in order to offer a comprehensive understanding of 'narratives of the social imaginary of the nation-people' in the Indian context (Bhabha 1994: 52). This alternation between a critique and an endorsement of rationalism could be seen as forming part of the political responses of the two novelists to specific events happening at that time. For example, Seth's endorsement of a secularism based on rationalist premises appears as an understandable response to the 'communalization' of politics in the 1990s, an apparent surrender of the public sphere to sectarian tendencies. In the next chapter, I offer a close reading of the narrative voice in *A Suitable Boy* and *Midnight's Children*, in order to explore the majoritarian premises of Seth's novel in relationship to minority identity, and to flesh out how Rushdie constructs a more 'radical' secular position by adopting a minoritarian stance for his narrator Saleem Sinai.

2 Minority identity in India

Midnight's Children and *A Suitable Boy*

This chapter discusses how the concept of secularism is intimately bound up in the development of postcolonial secular identity in the novel, through an analysis of how religious, rational secular and radical secular perspectives are articulated in *Midnight's Children* and *A Suitable Boy*. More specifically, I focus on how each novel deals with the question of minority identity in its representation of the nation. The different structuring of the narrative voice in the two novels – the Hindu third-person omniscient narrator of *A Suitable Boy* as opposed to the Muslim first-person narrator of *Midnight's Children* (though he is also of Hindu and Christian ancestry) – produces radically different configurations of the relationship between minorities and the state. We see how the development of rationalist secularism in *A Suitable Boy* shares some representational features with Roland Barthes's (1973) examples of 'myth'. Free indirect discourse serves to cement the alliance between narrator and characters in *A Suitable Boy* such as Nehru and the minister Mahesh Kapoor who support a resolutely secular perspective in politics.

In *A Suitable Boy*, the articulation of a rationalist secularism largely coincides with Nehruvian secular nationalism. It can be called majoritarian, for three reasons: first, because it has a rationalist approach to the question of religion in the public sphere, secondly because its third-person omniscient narrator embodies the perspective of a tolerant Hindu subject, and, thirdly, because the novel deals with India, and how India's politics towards minorities, especially Muslims, were played out after Partition.

In relation to the second point, the novel's secularism can be said to coincide with a middle-class (or upper-caste) Hindu point of view. Generally, this identification is implied. Only at one point is there an explicit identification of the narrator with one of the communities represented in the story. Significantly, this identification occurs when the novel gives a pseudo-etymology for the city of Brahmpur. In commenting on Hinduism, the narrator remarks that it is rare for a religious feeling to be entirely transcendent:

> Hindus as much as anyone else … are eager for terrestrial, not merely post-terrestrial blessings. *We* want specific results, whether to cure a child for disease or to guarantee his IAS results … or to find a suitable match for a daughter.
>
> (Seth 1993: 1178; emphasis added)

This *we* is inclusive of the narrator.

The novel's secularism does not correspond to an absence of religious feeling, but is rather a non-sectarianism, but within a middle-class Hindu framework. It can thus be likened to Indian 'conservative-national' narratives of the 1950s and 1960s that tended to consolidate upper-caste Hindu centrality, which increasingly becomes identified with a national and 'secular' identity, marginalizing other identities such as lower castes or different religious groups (Tharu and Lalita 1993: 77). The India of *A Suitable Boy* is the one shaped and defined by Partition, indeed the time period Seth chooses for his story, 1950–2, is directly influenced by the legacy of Partition and by Nehru. Thus the novel engages with a firmly bounded historical moment and geographical territory.

Midnight's Children, on the other hand, endorses a radical or 'minoritarian' secularism: a secular stance articulated from minority positions, similar to Said's 'secular criticism'. *Midnight's Children*'s minoritarian secularism is articulated through the first-person narrator, Saleem Sinai. His narrative of India, told from a minority perspective, necessarily transcends postcolonial national borders, and implicates the divided histories of India and Pakistan in each other. But despite their differences, the representations of India in the two novels share a common ideological matrix which can be traced back to Nehru's idea of the nation as a multicultural imagined community. Both novels recuperate India's syncretic and eclectic traditions in order to represent and rewrite Indian history. Chaudhuri calls *Midnight's Children* a Nehruvian epic, though the time of its publication coincided with the beginning of the end of Nehruvian India and of the Nehruvian secular consensus (Chaudhuri 2001: pp. xxiii–xxiv). *A Suitable Boy* could be read as an 'epic' novel in that it presents a meticulous mapping of social reality in the style of the realist novel and yet is characterized by a monologic narrative voice, a defining characteristic of the epic according to Bakhtin (1981: 3–40).

This recuperation of syncretic and eclectic elements in India's past can be likened to Nehru's textual and physical voyage of national 'discovery' which leads him to celebrate the civilizational diversity and multifariousness of India. Thus both novels develop an idea of Indian cultural distinctiveness premised on notions of an absorptive and syncretic civilization, which formed the basis of the nationalist secular conception of culture.

A Suitable Boy shows how the eclectic and multicultural traditions of India can be channelled in such a way as to create a civilizational support for a viable state ideology, as Nehru did. This can be read as a response to a period in which the Hindu right was aggressively pre-empting Nehruvian secular nationalism as an ideology for conceiving the relationship between the Hindu majority and the other Indian minorities. *Midnight's Children*, on the other hand, encompasses a larger time frame than Seth's novel, from 1915 to 1977. Its historical scope in some sense tends to recuperate a common past for the Indian subcontinent, both before and after Partition. By focusing on this wider time frame of the development of Indian nationhood and statehood, Rushdie shows how these diverse traditions and the 'composite' nature of Nehru's India which Seth celebrates in this novel, were progressively betrayed by India's politicians.

Imagining a polity

At the centre of both novels is the question of how to imagine a polity which can adequately encompass the multifarious and differing notions of identity that can be found in India. Seth chooses a statist approach to the question. Throughout the novel we witness an attempt to delineate a common denominator for all Indians in order to define who is an Indian citizen. He outlines the complex layering of communitarian and individual values that led to the formation of modern Indian identity, and which still today make the definition of Indian citizenship a problematic one. Though exploring the tentative status of the Indian citizen, Seth ultimately encompasses all the problematic figures of this Indianness – the chamars, the Muslim landowners, the Muslim courtesan and her entourage – within an ecumenical, inclusive notion of a single nationhood.

Seth's novel touches at heart the problem of how to conceive the rights of citizenship in postcolonial India, whether within a communitarian or an individualist framework. It would seem that the very definition of citizenship implies a relationship between the individual and the state, rather than that between communities and the state. The Indian Constitution, however, gives a definition of citizenship and its concomitant rights which is inconsistent: in some cases, the Constitution can be seen to uphold communitarian rights and, in other cases, individual rights. Before the law, the Indian citizen, according to the community to which s/he belongs, is subject to different civil codes.[1] There is a strong limit in the Indian Constitution to the liberal doctrine which cannot recognize the validity of any collective rights of cultural groups.

The inconsistencies between individual and collective rights before the law are most clearly seen with regards to the secular claims of the Indian state. Though the Constitution declares that the State shall not discriminate against any citizen on the grounds of religion, race, caste, sex, etc., it judges Muslims and Hindus according to different personal laws; moreover, Article 15(1) states that 'nothing … shall prevent the state from making any special provision for the advancement of any socially and educationally backward classes of citizens or for the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes' (Constitution of India 2000: 22). In *A Suitable Boy* Seth explores the fluid status of Indian citizenship, by foregrounding a series of conflicts between individual and communitarian values which shape the development of the characters. For example, the identity of Lata, the heroine, is largely shaped by the pressure imposed upon her by her mother, Mrs Rupa Mehra, to marry into her own caste, and her impossible love for the Muslim boy Kabir. Lata's character develops through this conflict between a family-oriented, communitarian mentality, and more individualistic values, a characteristic of much modern Indian fiction. The reader is gradually initiated into a system of ethics founded on a distinctly Indian interpretation of the individual vis-à-vis the family, the community, the state, the nation. Amitav Ghosh, in relation to his own novels, claims that for him writing about families 'is one way of not writing about the nation (or other restrictively imagined collectivities)' (www.amitavghosh.com). Seth and Ghosh testify to the difficulty of writing about the Indian 'private' self, the

narratization of the interiority which is a foundational aspect of the novel, without relating this interiority to the family in the first instance, then to the community, then to the state, and lastly (perhaps problematically) to the nation.

A Suitable Boy draws on the tradition of the biography or 'social family' novel. The web of relationships between the four families at the centre of the novel effectively connects each character in such a way that no one is 'left out', and the characters' actions and thoughts are all a function of the plot. The characters' 'humanness' – their place in life – cannot be revealed outside the 'strict framework' of plot relationships (Bakhtin 1984: 104). Of Lata, the main heroine of the novel, we know that she is 19, she studies English literature at the University of Brahmpur, her mother is looking for a husband for her: all things that contribute to a very well-defined role for her within the plot. Indeed, the initial impetus of the plot – and the title of the novel – are given by Mrs Rupa Mehra's search for *A Suitable Boy* for her younger daughter.

The 'secular Indianness' of *A Suitable Boy* is rendered by Seth in statist terms: only by relinquishing part of their cultural and religious identity can Muslims become Indian citizens. The effects of the Zamindari Abolition Act (a land reform act initiated by Nehru which aimed to abolish feudal land-holdings) on the way of life of the Muslim landowning elite in the (invented) state of Purva Pradesh are meant to be symbolic of this 'necessary' transformation of Muslim identity. The place of Muslims in the imagined community of India – and more generally, the relationship between the minority and the nation – is a central concern of both novels. What follows is an analysis of how these concerns are played out in the two texts.

Muslim identity in *Midnight's Children* and *A Suitable Boy*

The narrator of *Midnight's Children* embraces a minoritarian perspective precisely because he belongs to both Indian 'majority' and 'minority' cultures. His 'adoptive' parents are Muslim, but his real parents are English Christian and Hindu, respectively. He is brought up by a Goan Catholic ayah, and in the course of the novel switches nationalities: first he is Indian, then he becomes Pakistani. Saleem Sinai is thus in a unique position to embrace all mythologies, but at the same time he exhibits a wariness of any fixed belief. The story of his life seems

> to continuously put 'Hindu' and 'Muslim' (and 'Indian' and 'Pakistani') in question, to make visible the dialectic of majority and minority within which they are produced, which constitutes the larger part of the movement of Indian modernity itself.
>
> (Mufti 1998: 117)

Though Saleem himself turns out to be of mixed ancestry, a main narrative strand of the novel is the issue of Muslim nationalism, and of the transformation of Muslims into a minority community after Partition and Independence. Saleem's

grandfather, Aadam Aziz, is a secular Muslim, and he represents the dilemmas of a specifically Muslim secularism in the nationalist period and beyond. Shortly after his detachment from Islam, Aadam embraces a new nationalist credo, as he says to his young wife, Naseem, who wishes to maintain purdah: 'Forget about being a good Kashmiri girl. Start thinking about being a modern Indian woman' (Rushdie 1981: 34). The entire relationship between Aadam and Naseem revolves around secular versus religious, or nationalist versus traditionalist. Aadam briefly finds his ideal political representative in the figure of Mian Abdullah, who is trying to create a Muslim secular movement to contrast with the separatism of the Muslim League. Aadam Aziz explains his belief in Abdullah thus: 'I started off as a Kashmiri and not much of a Muslim. Then I got a bruise on the chest that turned me into an Indian. I'm still not much of a Muslim, but I'm all for Abdullah. He's fighting my fight' (Rushdie 1981: 40). Aadam's nationalism is not quite divorced from a Muslim point of view, without wholeheartedly endorsing it. The 'optimism disease', which according to Saleem was caught by many of India's Muslims in 1942, held out the promise of a specifically Muslim secular nationalism. But this nascent secular identity for Muslims was then destroyed by Partition and the making of Indian Muslims into a minority, who had to renounce much of their identity in order to become 'truly' Indian.

This loss, or transformation of Muslim identity into a more 'secular' one, is represented in *A Suitable Boy* as a necessary part in India's development towards a modern and democratic nation-state. The implementation of the Zamindari Abolition Act in Purva Pradesh becomes an event which shows how minority identity is reabsorbed into the state. According to the novel, it appears that the Act primarily affected the land-holdings, and therefore the entire way of life, of the Muslim elite. Nawabi culture, namely the elite Muslim culture of North India, has one of its (fictional) centres in Brahmpur. This culture is seen as a declining, disappearing culture, since it is inextricably linked through systems of patronage to the Muslim and Hindu zamindars (the feudal elite), a ruling class doomed to extinction because of the land reform acts being implemented in Purva Pradesh. A strong nostalgia is perceptible in the way Seth portrays Nawabi culture; a melancholy springing from the 'necessary' changes a country must undergo on its way to modernization.

Thus majoritarian secularism is melancholy and optimistic at the same time about the future of the nation. Much will have been lost, but feudalism will have been abolished, the authorial voice seems to be saying in Seth's novel. Much space is given in the novel to the representation of Nawabi culture, the culture of the feudal elite, with its entourage of courtesans, musicians, singers, whose livelihood depended on the Nawabs (the lords). In the novel, this culture, so typical of North India, is strongly represented, and in many points even defended, by women. Begum Abida Khan is the representative for the Muslim party in the Legislative Assembly in Brahmpur, and in the parliamentary debates staged in the novel hers is the 'sectarian' Muslim voice, as opposed to the secular Muslim voice of Abdus Salaam, the secretary of the Congress Minister Mahesh Kapoor.

One way in which, in the early years of Independence, Muslims were made to feel strongly their status of minorities, was through the occasional confiscation of their property, defined as 'evacuee property', namely properly belonging to Muslims who had left India for Pakistan, and therefore reclaimable by the state. This practice is highlighted by episodes in both novels. In *A Suitable Boy*, the episode is as follows. One evening, Zainab, the daughter of the Nawab Sahib of Baitar, is informed by her maidservant that a police constable is waiting outside her ancestral home, Baitar House. He is there to take over the mansion, as he has

> an order from the custodian of Evacuee Property and the Home Minister to take possession of all the parts of the house that are not inhabited, in view of the fact that most of the former residents have now established residence in Pakistan.
>
> (Seth 1993: 295)

Zainab, within the confines of purdah, manages to communicate with her father's private secretary by talking to him through a sheet between the zenana (women's quarters) and the mardana (men's quarters). The secretary takes her son and a letter written by her to the Chief Minister of the State, in which Zainab reminds him of a debt of gratitude he owes her father, the Nawab Sahib. The stratagem works; the Chief Minister telephones the Home Minister Agarwal and tells him to call the evacuation off. Baitar House remains in the hands of the Khans; Zainab's resourcefulness has paid off, even without her breaking out of purdah. And yet the positive ending of the episode is shown to be entirely dependent on the goodwill and gratitude of the Chief Minister Sharma towards the Khans; indeed, much Muslim property and business was expropriated as 'evacuee property' in India. Muslims, at best, are precariously protected by the legal system; their very way of life is in danger, at the hands of a threatening Hindu political majority.

A major point on which the two novels differ is whether state secularism failed or succeeded in protecting minorities. In *A Suitable Boy*, what happens to Zainab is seen as a dramatic, but minor incident; a regrettable instance of someone high up attempting to take advantage of the laws on evacuee property in order to lash out against a rival. But in *Midnight's Children*, appropriation of Muslim funds by the so-called secular government is foregrounded as an important moment of rupture in the secular nationalist narrative of the new nation-state.

One day, Ahmed Sinai, Saleem's father, discovers that all his assets have been frozen, by order of the government. His friend Dr Narlikar explains it thus:

> I blame myself entirely; we made ourselves too public. These are bad times, Sinai bhai – freeze a Muslim's assets, they say, and you make him run to Pakistan, leaving all his wealth behind him. Catch the lizard's tail and he'll snap it off! This so-called secular state gets some damn clever ideas.
>
> (Rushdie 1981: 135)

Saleem's parodic and allegorical take on reality literalizes the freezing of his father's assets into a physical fact, that his father's testicles have become ice-cold. State secularism cannot prevent religion and religious discrimination from re-entering India through the back door:

> Escaped cobras vanished into the sewers of the city; banded kraits were seen on buses. Religious leaders described the snake escape as a warning – the god Naga had been unleashed, they intoned, as a punishment for the nation's official renunciation of its deities. ('We are a secular state,' Nehru announced and Morarji and Patel and Menon all agreed: but still Ahmed Sinai shivered under the influence of the freeze).
>
> (Rushdie 1981: 137)

Seth's narrative of the Nehru years, on the other hand, highlights Nehru's active assumption of the role of protector of minorities, and the relative success at implementing a state secularism which ultimately managed to defend the rights of Muslims against the more conservative Hindu wing of Congress. What emerges from Seth's narrative is the idea that only state secularism can protect minorities; and no alternative solution to the minority issue is envisaged.

The political narrative of *A Suitable Boy* is largely focalized through the eyes of Mahesh Kapoor, the Minister of Revenue for the state of Purva Pradesh. He is both literally and metaphorically the representative of the Nehruvite Congress position within the Legislative Assembly. His major political rival is L.N. Agarwal, the conservative Congress Home Minister of Purva Pradesh. In *A Suitable Boy*, Nehru is portrayed as the most staunch protector of Indian Muslims. The narrator takes the view that, in the aftermath of the religiously motivated mass killings of Partition, Nehru chose the only political route which would guarantee a modicum of communal harmony in India: the active endorsement of a state secularism.

Seth painstakingly retraces, in a thinly veiled historical account, the intricate infighting that took place in the Congress Party of the early 1950s between the Hindu right wing, headed by Vallabhbhai Patel and Purushottamdas Tandon, and the left wing, secular Nehruvites, focused around the Muslim question. Many divisive elements were threatening to rip the Congress Party in two and compromise Nehru's leadership, and together with it any guarantees for Muslim citizens in the newly created Indian state. For the Hindu hardliners of the Congress,

> so successfully indeed had the two-nation theory – the Muslim League's justification for Partition – taken root in their own minds that they saw Muslim citizens of India as Muslims first and Indians only incidentally; and were willing to visit on their heads punishment for the actions of their co-religionists in the other country.
>
> Such talk repelled Nehru. The thought of India as a Hindu state with its minorities treated as second-class citizens, sickened him.
>
> (Seth 1993: 1037)

Nehru personally took on a series of measures to ensure that Muslims would not be treated as second-class citizens, such as accepting erstwhile leaders of the Muslim League into the Congress, trying to convince Muslims not to leave India for Pakistan, and attempting 'to soften some of the more draconian decisions of the Custodian-General of Evacuee Property, who had often acted more in the interests of those who hankered after evacuee property than those of the evacuees themselves' (Seth 1993: 1037).[2] The novel notes how Nehru 'had preached against communal enmity in every speech he had given – and Nehru was much given to speeches' (Seth 1993: 1037). Seth presents the actions that Nehru undertook in this period as improvised attempts to maintain unity in a country that, in the early 1950s and so soon after Partition, was at real risk of a civil war. Retaliation against Muslims for the horrors of Partition was very much in the air:

> All these actions infuriated people who saw Nehru as a rootless, deracinated Indian, whose sentimental creed was a pro-Muslim secularism, and who was divorced from the majority of his own Hindu citizenry.
>
> The only problem for his critics was that his citizenry loved him and would almost certainly vote for him, as it had done ever since his great tour in the 1930s, when he had travelled around the country, charming and stirring up vast audiences.
>
> (Seth 1993: 1037)

Nehru's pluralist conception of citizenship shaped the Constitution, at a time in which multiculturalism was not a term in current political usage. There were few models which 'could be used to help focus India's assorted diversities into a political structure founded on a democratic principle. This had to be invented through practice' (Khilnani 1997: 172). Seth's depiction of Nehru subscribes to this improvisational view of politics in terms of citizenship and religion. Khilnani rightly remarks that current interpretations of Nehruvian secularism 'impart a misleading ideological fixity to what was always much more an active precept of political prudence' (Khilnani 1997: 176).

There are many parallels between Nehruvian secularism as it is represented in *A Suitable Boy* and in Nehru's *The Discovery of India*, a nationalist version of Indian history and of the independence movement published in 1946, a year before Independence. However, these two texts leave no alternative for a secularism articulated from minority positions. There is no real space, either in Seth's or in Nehru's text, for a specifically Muslim secularism, of which Aadam Aziz is a representative figure in *Midnight's Children*. There is evidence in Nehru's *The Discovery of India* that secular nationalism, as articulated by him and others, denied a representative space to Muslim modernism (Mufti 1995: 75–96). Nehru finds that 'since British rule came to India, Moslems have produced few individuals of the modern type' (Nehru 1946: 413). The inability of the Muslim elite to modernize itself is not due to any innate failing, but 'derived from certain historical causes, from the delay in the development of a new industrial middle class, and the excessively feudal background of the Moslems, which blocked up

avenues of development and prevented the release of talent' (Nehru 1946: 413). Both in Nehru and in Seth, the irreducible heterogeneity of the minor and the major cultures is ascribed to a historical cause, and even more specifically to the Muslim elites' 'feudal background'. In *A Suitable Boy* the Nawab Sahib represents a glorious, yet retrograde culture, destined by history to disappear with the end of the zamindari system. The Muslims, from vital representatives of North Indian culture, have been reduced to the status of a minority, as is exemplified by the transformation of Baitar House, the Khans' ancestral home, 'which after Partition had stopped being the great community it had been' (Seth 1993: 284–5).

In the Legislative Assembly of Purva Pradesh, the politician Abida Khan strenuously defends the zamindari system against the land reforms being pushed by the ruling Congress Party. She emphasizes the centrality of Muslim culture in the state – 'it is we zamindars who have made this province what it is – who made it strong, who gave it its special flavour', she argues (Seth 1993: 307). The land reform act exemplifies how Muslims, in order to become Indian citizens 'fully', had to forgo a vital part of what constituted their past, their culture, in short their identity. In other words a Muslim could not be 'a Muslim outright' if he was to be conceived of as a modern Indian:

> secular nationalism presents a specifically Muslim modernism with the following choice: it can either dissolve itself within that nationalist mainstream, and simultaneously give up any claim to being 'representative', or be by definition (and perversely) communalist, retrograde, and effectively in collusion with the feudalizing policies of imperialism; in either case, it must cease being 'true' to itself.
>
> (Mufti 1995: 84)

The only reason why Muslims are now a minority in India is because of the creation of the Muslim state of Pakistan in 1947. But precisely because they have now been transformed into a minority, their previous religious and cultural identity is forced to be subsumed into that of the secular Indian citizen, represented by *A Suitable Boy* as a politically necessary step for India's coming into modernity.

Muslim nationalism in *Midnight's Children*

Midnight's Children provides an interesting historical account of Muslims prior to their being transformed into a minority. It provides a counter-narrative to the resolutely majoritarian secular perspective of *A Suitable Boy*, where the Muslim issue appears only in post-Partition terms. Saleem recounts how his grandfather, Aadam Aziz, who was a Muslim, though 'not much' of one, was wary of the Muslim League. So was Mian Abdullah, who attempted to begin a Muslim secular movement called the Free Islam Convocation. The friend and patron of this movement, the Rani of Cooch Naheen, is highly contemptuous of the Muslim League, which she identifies with the feudal imperialists, 'that bunch of toadies!' as she calls them (Rushdie 1981: 46).

Mian Abdullah ends up being murdered by Islamist fanatics with 'crescent knives'. The historical model for Mian Abdullah may well have been the Kashmiri nationalist Sheikh Abdullah, who promoted the ideals of a secular India from a Muslim perspective. The story of Mian Abdullah and the Free Islam Convocation tells of a secular Muslim nationalism which was sympathetic to, but not entirely represented by, the mainstream nationalism of the Congress. This is why Aadam Aziz claims that Mian Abdullah (and not, for example, Nehru or Gandhi) is fighting his fight. The inclusive nationalism of the Congress party, which emphasized the composite character of Indian society, was soon legitimized, especially after Partition, as the sole possible outcome of a secular political agenda for India. Secular nationalists, including those who happened to be Muslim, were expected to identify with Congress as their representative party. The Muslim nationalist was seen as a figure whose religion was always foregrounded, in contrast with that of the secular (Hindu) nationalist, who was a nationalist 'first and foremost'. Thus the term 'communalism' came to connote anything that did not conform to the inclusionary idiom of Congress.

However, *Midnight's Children* and Rushdie's next novel, *Shame*, clearly aim to show that the secular and multicultural premises of the Indian nation-state, however majoritarian they may be, are politically more far-seeing and vastly more democratic than the religious authoritarianism of Pakistan, even if one is the member of a minority. Proof of this is that the secular Sinais prefer, initially, to cast in their lot with the new secular India rather than go to Pakistan, though they eventually bow to family and community pressure and emigrate. The peregrinations of the Sinais thus reveal the multiple articulations of difference that internally mark the outward image of a homogenized Muslim cultural nationalism. To some extent, however, Saleem shows a sympathy with the Congress secular nationalist project which constituted the Indian nation-state, and strongly critiques the sectarian agenda of the Muslim League, the only political party which afforded Muslims an alternative from the Congress. But non-sectarianism, for Saleem, does not mean anti-religiosity, indeed he is always at pains to stress how his own birth, and that of the Indian nation-state, is imagined in both secular and religious/mythical terms at the same time – the 'strange middle ground' of his grandfather's agnosticism.

Midnight's Children shares *A Suitable Boy*'s endorsement of Nehruvianism, but without Seth's explicit support for Nehru's state policy. Saleem's story tells how Nehru's ecumenical and tolerant secularism was progressively narrowed down to the increasingly monolithic national ethos of Indira Gandhi's reign, whose electoral slogans proclaimed that 'India is Indira' and 'Indira is India'. The difference between Rushdie's approach to secularism and that of Seth's (and Nehru's) is that while *Midnight's Children* sees syncretism and eclecticism as irreducible components of Indian identity, with its concomitant risks (and euphoria) of centrifugal tendencies and dissolution of national boundaries, Nehru (and Seth) want to see this syncretism transcended and sublated into a modern, rationalist secularism. In *Midnight's Children* we witness the secularization of an eclectic and polytheistic tradition, which preserves its syncretism within a non-religious framework. In

A Suitable Boy, on the other hand, the monological narrative voice is underscored by a rationalist secularism. Indeed, rationalist secularism acquires the status of a mythical discourse underpinning the representation of Indian history in *A Suitable Boy*, while its de-mythification underpins the ironic allegory of historical fiction we find in *Midnight's Children*.

Mythologies of secularism

Seth, by presenting a synchronic view of the secular state in its 'ideal' form, namely the early 1950s under Nehru, who was its prime architect, mythifies it by freezing it in time. In Seth's hands, everything in India's history has been leading up to this moment, and the major historical events which happen in the novel are working towards the perfecting of the secular, democratic, progressive nation-state, including the relegation of religion and religious imaginings of the nation to the private sphere. Rushdie, on the other hand, by placing secularism within a diachronic, allegorical unfolding of the nation's history, historicizes secular nationalism and effectively reveals it as myth. Both Rushdie and Seth explicitly characterize nationalism as a sort of mythopoesis. In *Midnight's Children*, one witnesses Saleem's constant drive to expose all myth and beliefs as fictive processes, which does not do away with their meaningfulness (though meaning is constantly put into question): 'What's real and what's true aren't necessarily the same', says a character in the novel (Rushdie 1981: 79). The de-mystification present in *Midnight's Children* resembles Roland Barthes's 'revolutionary language'. Unlike myth, which tends to preserve the image of reality, revolutionary language is transformative in the sense that it is involved in 'making' the world: 'It is because it generates speech which is fully, that is to say initially and finally, political, and not, like myth, speech which is initially political and finally natural, that Revolution excludes myth' (Barthes 1973: 159).

There is a community in *Midnight's Children* which seems to possess a consciousness of the depoliticizing tendency of myth; they are the magicians living in the Muslim ghetto in the shadow of the Friday mosque in Delhi, where Saleem takes shelter after being driven from his uncle's house. He finds an old friend there, Picture Singh. From him,

> Saleem Sinai learned that Picture Singh and the magicians were people whose hold on reality was absolute; they gripped it so powerfully that they could bend it every which way in the service of their arts, but they never forgot what it was.
>
> (Rushdie 1981: 399)

The magicians' manipulation of language recalls revolutionary speech in so far as they seek to transform the world through language without eliding the radical discrepancy between language and reality. Elisions and erasures of this type constitute the basis of mythical language, which 'is initially political and finally natural'.

A Suitable Boy articulates a form of mythical language, which is that of rationalist or transcendent secularism. Barthes defines myth as depoliticized speech. In this sense, in *A Suitable Boy*, secularism as a national discourse is imbued with mythical qualities because it has assumed the role of the ideological framework according to which the Indian state and society are to develop. Instead of considering secularism as one discourse among others, secularism operates as a metadiscourse into which other beliefs and imaginings of the nation are subsumed, especially religious ones, somewhat in the way Barthes describes the evolution of bourgeois ideology:

> And just as bourgeois ideology is defined by the abandonment of the name 'bourgeois', myth is constituted by the loss of the historical quality of things; in it, things lose the memory that they once were made.
>
> (Barthes 1973: 142)

One way in which the rationalist secular discourse becomes mythified in Seth is through the subtle use of free indirect speech. This is most evident in the political debates. The novel describes at length the ways in which communal issues are aired and resolved in the democratic space of the State Legislative Assembly. The Assembly is a key site in understanding how the novel constructs Indian identity; here, in the parliament, is where the nation is being built. The various voices making up the novel's religious, political and linguistic heteroglossia are given a representative space within its democratic confines. Indeed the purpose of the parliamentary debates between Agarwal (right-wing Congress member), Abida Khan (representative of the zamindars and of 'sectarian' Muslims more generally), the Socialist MLA, and Mahesh Kapoor (left-wing, Nehruvite Congress member) seems to be that of showing exactly how the democratic process transcends the more strident communal elements in each of these voices. In such a way the potentially centrifugal, heteroglot political tendencies of the newborn nation are shown to be contained within a more orderly and monological democratic space.

According to Bakhtin, the language of the novel is deployed to degrees of greater or lesser proximity to the author and his intentions. Certain aspects of language directly express these intentions, others *refract* those intentions, namely the narrator does not meld completely with any of these points of view, but rather accents them parodically, ironically and so forth (Bakhtin 1981: 299). Leaving aside the question of intentionality on the part of the author, in *A Suitable Boy* the narrative voice portrays the characters with varying degrees of sympathy and identification or distancing, effected through the technique of free indirect speech. This alternating identification and alienation of the voices in the novel ultimately lies in its effect on the reader, and in which character we are made to identify with.

In the political debates of the novel the narrative voice identifies most strongly with the perspective of Mahesh Kapoor, the politician associated with the left-wing Nehruvite position. The voices of the other political representatives, such as that of

the right-wing Agarwal, Abida Khan or the Socialist MLA are accented parodically and ironically, and are portrayed as essentially *unreasonable*. These nuances given to the characters' speech implicitly mark the detachment of the narrative voice from theirs. The position of Mahesh Kapoor is implicitly identified with the narrative voice, which endorses a calm, measured, *rationalist secular* position. Other voices are completely denied such identification: 'The author does not express *himself* in them (as the author of the word) – rather he *exhibits* them as a unique speech-thing, they function for him as something completely reified' (Bakhtin 1981: 299).

An example of a reified voice is that of the conservative Home Minister Agarwal, whose thought, filtered through free indirect discourse, is made to appear almost downright communal, and thus distanced from the narrative voice: 'They were all fanatics, these Muslims, who appeared not to realize they were in this country on sufferance' (Seth 1993: 273). His thought appears in a debate in the Legislative Assembly following the police shooting of an unarmed crowd in the vicinity of a recently erected Hindu temple. Abida Khan, representative of the Muslims, flourishes her aggressive rhetoric in attacking Agarwal on the issue. Her voice is distanced from the narrative voice because her interpretation of the facts appears tendentious:

> the honourable Minister should be ashamed of himself… . If it were the blood of his own co-religionists that was flowing in the streets, the honourable Minister would not 'wait until such time'. We know of the overt and tacit support he gives that foul organization the Linga Rakshak Samiti, set up expressly to destroy the sanctity of our mosque –
>
> (Seth 1993: 270–1)

Suddenly Abdus Salaam, a left-wing Muslim Nehruvite, speaks out in the debate. He very reasonably asks Agarwal why a deterrent police force was not maintained at the site of the temple itself, so that there would have been no need to fire in that panicky manner (Seth 1993: 273). Abdus Salaam's question evidently embodies the most rational and secular position: above factionalism, there is the meta-space of law and order, above conflicting religious discourses there is the metadiscourse of secularism itself. It is through the masterly use of free indirect discourse, and the subtle positioning of the narrative voice to coincide with the rational secular perspective, that rationalist secularism becomes a 'mythology'. The reader identifies much more with Mahesh Kapoor than with Agarwal, or Abida Khan. Her voice comes across as a quintessentially shrill 'communal' voice, though we also get the sense that her plight, and that of her party, the feudal landlords, must be pitied since they will soon be submerged as a ruling class by the march of history.

The Legislative Assembly becomes the place where the old identities ('communal' Muslim and 'communal' Hindu) confront each other, and through this conflict a new national identity is being created, premised on a secular position. It is significant that every important historical and political event of the novel – the riot of the shoemakers, the Hindu–Muslim riot, the disaster of the Pul Mela and

of course the Zamindari Abolition Act – is followed by a debate in the parliament. The event is first represented as an important moment in the emerging Indian polity's socio-political fabric, and then discussed by various characters in the assembly, where it is given different interpretations according to the point of view of the political party involved. It seems that the purpose of these discussions is to show that historical events retain a strong performative aspect; they are not yet settled into a pedagogical reiteration of their role in the story of the nation. In other words, Nehruvianism was a much more fluid form of political praxis than its modern-day critics think.

The narrator's point of view on the success of Nehru's secular politics is that it depended more on Nehru's personal charisma and popular appeal than on a genuinely negotiated outcome between different communities (see Bilgrami 1998: 400). Witness how the 'masses' react to Nehru's speech in favour of the Congress representative, during the electoral campaign in the village of Debaria:

> They cheered when he talked about the size of the Bhakra dam, they cheered when he said that the Americans must not oppress Korea – whatever Korea was. And they cheered most of all when he requested their support, which he did almost as an afterthought. In the eyes of his people, Nehru – the prince and hero of Independence, the heir of Mahatma Gandhi – could do no wrong.
>
> (Seth 1993: 1354)

The narrator gives an unfailingly positive assessment of Nehru's leadership, because he believes it helped to save India from ulterior communal conflict for many decades after Partition.

In contrast with *A Suitable Boy*'s omniscient third-person narrator, whose position coincides with a transcendent secularism, the Christian, Hindu, Muslim, socialist, Indian and Pakistani Saleem displays a ludic stance towards ideology of any kind, whether it is religion or rationalism. In referring to Arun Kolatkar's poem *Jejuri* and its critiques on the part of traditionalist Indian academics, Rushdie notes that books which 'mix traditions, or which seek consciously to break with tradition, are often treated as highly suspect' (Rushdie 1990: 66). Rushdie condemns the bogey of authenticity, the idea that literature is or has to be the expression of nationality. Only religious extremists believe that there is a pure, unalloyed tradition from which to draw, and so 'the reality of the mixed tradition is replaced by the fantasy of purity' (Rushdie 1990: 68).[3] Rushdie's position here is similar to Said's secular criticism, 'in its suspicion of totalizing concepts, in its discontent with reified objects, in its impatience with guilds, special interests, imperialized fiefdoms, and orthodox habits of mind' (Said 1983: 29).

A wariness of any fixed belief

The dilemma between modernization and tradition, or between rationalist secularism and a religious worldview, is central to both novels, but is resolved by

them in different fashion. *A Suitable Boy* resorts to an old-fashioned, but appealing Nehruvian secular rationalism for India, which unproblematically relegates religious practice to the private sphere. *Midnight's Children*, while emerging from a similar Nehruvian ideological matrix, dissolves the rigid binarism of secular versus religious by presenting a narrator who continuously oscillates between belief and scepticism. Saleem has inherited this trait from his grandfather, Aadam Aziz, 'the hole at the center of himself caused by his (which is also my) failure to believe or disbelieve in God' (Rushdie 1981: 275). The novel starts off with the story of a man, Aadam Aziz, who experiences a religious crisis. He has just returned from medical studies abroad, and is attempting to go back to his 'former self' after his brush with Western scepticism and agnosticism, by going out in the early morning to pray, though he feels caught in a strange middle ground, 'trapped between belief and disbelief' (Rushdie 1981: 12). As he kneels and bows his head towards the ground, his nose strikes against a tussock of earth, and draws blood:

> And my grandfather, lurching upright, made a resolve. Stood. Rolled cheroot. Stared across the lake. And was knocked forever into that middle place, unable to worship a God in whose existence he could not wholly disbelieve. Permanent alteration: a hole.
>
> (Rushdie 1981: 12)

Thus both Aadam and Saleem share a wariness about any *fixed* belief, and Saleem shows how he continuously absorbs influences, as is exemplified by his genealogy and his biography, and swallows all doctrines enthusiastically. Saleem's retelling of Indian history together with his own shows up the religious and mythical narratives that simultaneously accompany the founding of a secular nation through Nehru; indeed Nehru himself is revealed as a politician who consults astrologists despite all the scientific Five-Year Plans he and his advisers draw up.

In *Midnight's Children*, Bombay becomes a symbol of the vibrant multiculturalism of Nehruvian India. The city's unique character is made up of a mix of diverse cultural and religious traditions, as emerges from Saleem's half-mythical, half-historical tale of its inception. But then we witness the progressive decline of this optimism of unbounded possibilities, through the gradual suppression and dismemberment of the *Midnight's Children* Club; the children gradually lose their capacity to communicate telepathically, and some die, or disappear.[4] Through the development of Saleem's history of the nation, we sense that Saleem wishes to recuperate the eclectic and multifarious component of Indian tradition, which is being increasingly channelled into a monolithic state ideology. The ending of the novel, however, seems to leave things open, with the almost triumphant dissolution of Saleem into 600 million constitutive entities.

Creating the chamchawalas

Saleem's narrative in some sense does seem to endorse a Nehruvian, or progressivist vision of India, which is seen to have contributed to the spread of a multicultural,

caste- and religion-blind ethos just after Independence, in direct contrast with the sectarian atmosphere of pre-Independence days. Certainly both *Midnight's Children* and *A Suitable Boy* document the rise of a middle class in which caste or religious lines are less and less marked, and new discrimination appears along class lines. In *Midnight's Children* this novel form of class discrimination is shown to be in stark contrast with the rabid communalism of the period just before Independence.

Nowhere is this better exemplified than in the two very different environments Ahmed and Amina Sinai, Saleem's parents, inhabit before and after Partition/ Independence. Ahmed and Amina Sinai first settle in Old Delhi, in the Muslim *muhalla* (which means quarter, suburb, from the Arabic mahalla). Then in June 1947, just two months before Independence (and the birth of their child), the Sinais settle in a chic, cosmopolitan and Anglicized Bombay neighbourhood, where the community is not bound by religious ties but rather by socio-economic ones.

The first neighbourhood the Sinais settle in before Independence is markedly Muslim, 'where the cows kept away, knowing they weren't sacred here' (Rushdie 1981: 69). It is represented as a sectarian environment, where religion, rather than class or language, is the uniting factor. Sindhi and Bengali neighbours unite against their Hindu neighbour and 'hurled multilingual abuse at him from the windows' (Rushdie 1981: 73). The Hindu Lifafa Das, the 'peepshow man', is nearly lynched by a mob when a little girl gets incensed because she doesn't want to wait her turn to see into his black box containing panoramas. Amina Sinai, pregnant with her first child (whom Saleem leads us to believe is himself), rescues Lifafa Das from the lynching, through 'some realization that she was her father's daughter', namely she is also opposed to superstition and religious bigotry. In return for having saved his life, Lifafa Das offers her a prophecy of her son's future by the great seer Shri Ramram Seth. And, 'despite her memories of her father's skepticism', Amina agrees (Rushdie 1981: 78). Like her father, Amina is unable to entirely discard religion, though the eclecticism of Indian faith is foregrounded by the fact that the seer is a Hindu. The point Saleem is making here is that religion is fundamental in the construction of Indian identity, though it is conceived as part of a *syncretic* religious tradition, rather than separatist religious identities.

Saleem is always at pains to stress how his own birth, and that of the nation-state, are imagined in both secular and religious/mythical terms at the same time – the strange middle ground of his grandfather's agnosticism. At the eve of the birth of her child, which Saleem wants us to think is coinciding with, and partaking of, the birth of the Indian nation, Amina is defending a Hindu; she is upholding the importance of inter-religious unity at the eve of independence.

> '*Listen*,' my mother shouted, '*Listen well. I am with child. I am a mother who will have a child, and I am giving this man my shelter. Come on now, if you want to kill, kill a mother also and show the world what men you are!*'
>
> (Rushdie 1981: 77)

The announcement of her son's conception, the fact that from the moment of his conception he seems to have become public property, coincides with the upholding of communal unity; though the allegorical correspondence between Saleem's life-story and the biography of the Indian nation is doubly complicated by the fact that the baby she was carrying does not turn out to be her son. Amina is clearly secular, namely anti-communal, in this episode, though her secularism does not prevent her from wanting her son's future to be prophesied by a Hindu seer. Saleem's birth is heralded *both* by a defence of a secular/tolerant point of view *and* by a soothsayer; with the suggestion, given the correspondence of allegory, that this multiple heralding could be applied to the birth of India as well.

The markedly Muslim identity of the Old Delhi neighbourhood where the Sinais first settle is in stark contrast with the Methwold Estate, the Bombay neighbourhood they move to in June 1947. The Bombay setting introduces an important theme of Rushdie's fiction, the chamchawalas, the Indian comprador class who took over power directly from the hands of the colonial ruling class. Not for nothing the Sinai's new home is called Buckingham Villa, which they have bought from its British owner, William Methwold, who has sold all of his property to Indians of the 'right sort', such as Saleem's father.

The make-up of his neighbourhood is multi-religious. Among the post-Independence elite, the factor of economic class emerges as a more cohesive bond than religion. With days to go before Independence, the soon-to-be-ruling class is adopting the customs and ways of their ex-colonial masters, 'celebrating the cocktail hour' and 'learning about ceiling fans and gas cookers and the correct diet for budgerigars' (Rushdie 1981: 99). This 'composite' and 'secular' ruling class of independent India is united by a common language, English. From the multilingual environment of the *muhalla*, where the unifying factor is religion and not language or class, the Sinais have moved to a monolingual, Indian English-speaking middle-class neighbourhood. Already the Sinais have shown themselves to be rather secularized; their move to Bombay is made by Saleem to coincide with Earl Mountbatten's announcement that India is to be partitioned. So instead of moving to Pakistan, they stay behind and become part of India's ruling class, rather than Pakistan's ruling class.

Yet the Sinais' frequent shifts between India and Pakistan indicate that the dilemma faced by Indian Muslims since Aadam Aziz's time has remained unaltered after Independence. The Sinais are a minority in India, which effectively amounts to the renunciation of a part of their identity as Muslims, in order to become Indian citizens. Saleem's version of historical events seems to indicate that, in the early years of Independence, a fluid identity was still possible and that in those heady days, there was a place for families like his in multicultural, cosmopolitan Bombay. But in *Midnight's Children* one sees that, after Nehru's death, Indian secularism gradually loses its momentum, together with the promise of a democratic and multicultural society, culminating with the dark years of the Emergency.

At the centre of this national drama in *Midnight's Children* is the problem of a minority identity, which inevitably spills over the borders of the Indian nation-state. A story of India told by a Muslim cannot but be a story of India and Pakistan

together – Indian Muslim identity today is inextricably linked to the history of both nations, and more than ever in the traumatic event of Partition. Herein lies the novel's radical secularism, or 'secular criticism', which tries to rethink an '"India" in which "Muslim" does not function as the name of minority. The obverse of this critical imperative is that Pakistan itself has to be scrupulously recognized … as an *Indian* – and not simply South Asian – polity and society' (Mufti 1998: 118).

Midnight's Children successfully addresses this critical imperative by presenting us with a version of India which is both India and Pakistan; Saleem is both the middle-class boy with a Christian ayah, Hindu and Muslim parents living in the cosmopolitan city of Bombay, and the young man who fights in the Pakistani army when it invades East Pakistan.

Secularism and the private sphere

The new secular identity being forged for Indians after Independence tended to elide religion and caste from the public sphere and relegate it to the private sphere. In *A Suitable Boy*, the secularism espoused by the narrative voice in the political sections of the novel is counter-balanced by a celebration of distinctly traditionalist ethics in the private sphere. The Minister of Revenue Mahesh Kapoor's rejection of his Hindu identity in public, his adoption of the 'drab new robes of secularism', are at one with his rejection of his caste identity.

The genealogy of the secular self is characterized by the freezing of caste and, to a lesser extent, of religion:

> The progressivist narrative of liberal humanism (the emancipatory narrative of the left being, in this respect, a variation of it) outlines a trajectory of self-fashioning where the self gradually sheds its ethnic, caste, linguistic and gender markers and attains the abstract identity of the citizen or becomes an individual.
>
> (Dhareshwar 1993: 116)

Citizenship is achieved through a shedding of previous communitarian identities; for Hindus it means repressing their caste and the outward markers of religiosity, as Mahesh Kapoor does. The emergence of the citizen-subject is premised on an essentialist notion of the human: 'a substantive base that precedes and somehow remains prior to and outside of the structurings of gender, class, caste, or community' (Tharu and Niranjana 1996: 235).

In post-independence India, caste hierarchy has been displaced by a secular hierarchy – a meritocracy premised on efficiency – which refigures, transforms and redeploys caste: 'professing secularism enables a displacement of caste (and also community) from the middle class sphere, so that it gets marked as what lies *outside*, is *other* than, the middle class' (Tharu and Niranjana 1996: 239–40). There is a repressed, or rather *concealed*, upper-caste/upper-class component of national secularism. Caste and religion must not be allowed to enter the public domain; hence it becomes repressed by being driven into the private domain.

Haresh Khanna is a boy who is being considered by Mrs Rupa Mehra as a prospective match for her daughter Lata. He is involved in the shoe trade, considered an impure profession by traditional Hindu standards. And yet the fact that he works for the Praha shoe company (modelled on the true-life Bata Shoe Company) does not entail a loss of caste in the eyes of Mrs Rupa Mehra, because it has to do with the world of work and business, which are 'inevitably' modernized in cultural terms. Of course, the two spheres – the domestic and the workplace – must be kept rigorously separate in order to maintain this equilibrium between Indianization of private mores and modernization of business practices. If there is a mixture of these two spheres, a conflict can potentially arise, as when Lata and Mrs Rupa Mehra visit the shoe factory with Haresh. Both women are overpowered by the smell in the tannery: 'Somewhere within [Lata] had risen an atavistic revulsion against the whole polluting business of hides and carrion and everything associated with leather' (Seth 1993: 625). Lata is shocked when Haresh tells her that he visits the tannery once a week. Those involved in the tanning of hides are seen as ultimately impure, according to deeply ingrained Hindu belief, and are therefore generally untouchable – like those living in the Ravidaspur slum at the outskirts of Brahmpur. Haresh says to them: 'An uncle of mine in Delhi thinks that I have become polluted, that I have lost caste by working with leather. Caste! I think he is a fool, and he thinks that I'm one' (Seth 1993: 626). He defends his choice to work in the tannery as a good business move. Caste is denied a space in the world of business and the workplace; yet ultimately Lata accepts Haresh's offer of marriage and thus marries within her own caste. The possibility of an inter-religious union with Kabir, the Muslim boy she is in love with, is discarded. The novel's overt Nehruvian secularism in matters pertaining to religious conflict and political practice is paradoxically undermined by its espousal of a traditionalist ethics in the private domain.

The role of English in the othering of caste and religion is essential, as we shall see in the chapter on language in the two novels. The national elite appropriated English as a 'semiotic system of modernity':

> to speak about caste, or to theorize it, in English, in the political idiom, however eclectic it may be, that English makes available, is already to distance caste practice as something alien to one's subject position.
>
> (Dhareshwar 1993: 118)

Caste then becomes repressed by being driven into the private domain, where the vernacular is often deployed. English assumes the function of a metalanguage vis-à-vis caste and tradition, the one in which the metadiscourse of secularism is articulated. Thus, in the private domain, which is also the domain of the vernacular, caste practices could be reiterated or reinvented (Dhareshwar 1993: 118). In *A Suitable Boy*, the English language of the novelistic discourse is characterized by a subject-position which denies a space to caste-marks and religious connotations in the *public* sphere, while an enormous representative space is given to tradition, culture, religion – the markers of a distinctively Indian identity – in the *private*

sphere. We have the celebration of secular politics in the public domain – the authorial identification with the voice of Mahesh Kapoor and his left-of-centre secular politics – and the realistic prevalence of traditional casteism and religion in the private domain.

This divide is also split along the lines of gender. Here we go back to Tharu and Niranjana's formulation of the citizen-subject:

> The shaping of the normative Indian/human subject involved, on the one hand, a dialectical relationship of inequality and opposition with the classical subject of Western liberalism, and, on the other, its structuring as upper-caste, middle-class, Hindu, and male.
>
> (Tharu and Niranjana 1995: 236)

Mahesh Kapoor is determinedly secular in the public domain, namely the Legislative Assembly, electoral politics, and his siding with Nehru in the Congress party split; whereas in the domestic sphere, his wife belongs to a revivalist Hindu organization which promotes a 'purified' form of Hinduism. The devout Mrs Mahesh Kapoor urges her husband to have the Ramcharitmanas, a prayer in honour of the god Ram, recited in their house. Mahesh Kapoor, however, brusquely vetoes her request, on the grounds that he has a secular image, 'and in a town like this where everyone is beating the drum of religion, I am not going to join in with the shehnai' (Seth 1993: 355). For a politician of the Congress, it will not do to openly practise Hindu rituals, even if he believed in them, and Kapoor clearly does not. His wife however, 'believed – though she would not have voiced this belief – that her husband was quite wrongheaded in divesting himself of the religious rites and ceremonies that gave meaning to his life and donning the drab new robes of his new religion of secularism' (Seth 1993: 355). As we have seen for Nehru, for Mahesh Kapoor religion is largely identified with a series of superstitious and pernicious traditions which must gradually disappear or adapt themselves to the new political climate of tolerance, which by implication relegates them to the private sphere.

The wedding that takes place at the opening of the novel is that between their son Pran and Savita Mehra; namely an arranged marriage between two people belonging to the same caste. It is clear that in matters like the marriage of their son, the mothers prevail. The very first pages of the novel make it clear that this marriage has been arranged by the mothers, and more specifically by Mrs Rupa Mehra, the mother of the bride. She defends her choice of husband for her older daughter by characterizing him as 'a good, decent, cultured, khatri boy' (Seth 1993: 4).

Though Mahesh Kapoor is secular in public, his relationship with his wife is completely traditional, which is represented by the fact that we never learn her name, since she is always known by the name of her husband. Mrs Mahesh Kapoor never thinks of her husband by his name, but only – and with a bit of authorial irony – as 'her lord and master the Minister of Revenue'. Yet the lord and master finds himself powerless when it comes to the organization of the

wedding. Mrs Rupa Mehra refuses to let him invite a singer of ghazals to perform at the wedding, because she is Muslim.

The othering of the Muslim in the domestic space of the novel is intensified later on, when Maan falls in love with this courtesan, Saeeda Bai, and has an affair with her. The perils of a misalliance between Maan and Saeeda Bai form a parallel plotline to that between Lata and Kabir. In both cases, the relationships fail; interestingly, the blindness of passion is seen as the root of its cause, rather than the more obvious problems arising from inter-religious marriage. Maan ends up stabbing his best friend Firoz out of misplaced jealousy about Saeeda Bai; Lata, on a much less melodramatic note, thinks Kabir is having an affair with someone else and is shocked by her own enraged response. The wild emotions Lata and Maan suffer because of their jealousy become the reason why they put an end to their respective relationships. One can postulate a link between the strong emotions that Kabir and Saeeda Bai evoke and the fact that they are Muslims – whether the very fact of it being a forbidden love provoked such passions in Lata and Maan. The ending of the novel achieves, in my view, only a rather superficial closure. Lata decides that Kabir is not good for her; she wants tranquillity rather than passion from her husband, not to mention that her mother would never countenance such an inter-religious union. Maan, after he stabs his friend nearly to death on her account, finds that he has begun to suffer a violent revulsion of feeling against himself and Saeeda Bai. Towards the last pages of the novel, both Kabir and Saeeda Bai are abruptly dismissed; their exit is not entirely worked through, it is not fully organic to the novelistic structure. The last image we have of Kabir is of him walking along the river disconsolately: 'After a short while he came to a factory, the walls of which came down to the Ganga and prevented him from going further. But he was too tired anyway. He pressed his head against the wall' (Seth 1993: 1348).

These Muslim characters are allowed no place in the novel's purportedly 'happy ending'. This twist signals the narrative limits of the nation-space mapped out by the novel. The novel ends on a note of uncertainty; it is not at all clear whether Lata will be happy with her new husband, or whether Maan will ever recover from his ordeal. But finally, for Maan and Lata, tradition and family appear as empty, frightening containing devices, which will grant them, superficially, security and a comfortable existence, yet more as a desperate form of escapism than anything truly solid. More tragically, in their return to the fold, they have created victims, as Maan perhaps dimly realizes when he meets Saeeda Bai for the last time. In some sense then, the construction of citizenship in the novel makes victims of the Muslims; both in the public sphere, with the implementation of the Zamindari Abolition Act which will irrevocably demote them as a ruling class in the state of Purva Pradesh, and in the private sphere, where their culture will gradually lose prominence, without there being the possibility of a more profound social integration, as the failure of inter-religious unions shows.

Lata and Maan's attempts to work against the barriers of caste and religion are ultimately unsuccessful; the social and familial pressures bearing down upon inter-religious unions are portrayed as too strong to resist. Lata and Maan convince

themselves that marrying their Muslim lovers can only bring tragedy, and the events of the novel bear this out. In the rejection of the possibility of inter-religious unions, the majoritarian secularism of the novel shows its limits. The myth of a postcolonial secular citizenship is lacerated.

An attempt to trace a genealogy of this postcolonial citizenship is present in *Midnight's Children*. The abstract, secular citizen of postcolonial India is slowly unravelled by the frequent border-crossings of the migrant Sinais, whose place of origin is Kashmir. Saleem, in speaking of Kashmir, comments on his family's separateness from both India and Pakistan; he is thus in a unique position to understand the origins of the 1965 war between India and Pakistan. The religio-communal basis of the conflict is 'translated' into the more acceptable antagonism of mutually hostile nation-states.

In these pages I have discussed the representation of majority and minority identity and its wider relation to the nation, in *A Suitable Boy* and *Midnight's Children*. The next chapter will continue the exploration of this theme in two other novels of the canon, Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* and Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*.

3 Secularism and syncretism in *The Shadow Lines* and *The Satanic Verses*

While *Midnight's Children* dealt with the dilemma of secularism and minority in the creation of the Indian nation-state, *The Satanic Verses* (1988), Rushdie's later novel, deals with this issue in the cultural context of South Asian migration to the UK. A common concept emerges from the representation of the Muslim migrant in these two novels: namely an idea of 'postcolonial citizenship', which entails learning how to negotiate the complex and layered identities relating to gender, religion, caste, social class, language, in relationship to a modernizing concept of citizenship, both in India and in Britain. Whether it is a question of being Muslim in India, or a South Asian Muslim in Britain, alternative notions of belonging frequently enter into conflict with state-backed versions of national identity.

The Satanic Verses attempts to 'exhibit' (in the Bakhtinian sense of reifying speech in order to distance it from the narrative voice) racist and xenophobic discourses in contemporary British society, on the one hand, and monolithic unchanging discourses about Islam on the other. It is a truly secular enterprise, since it attempts to scrutinize enduring mythologies and cultural assumptions of British and migrant alike. A characteristic of novels belonging to this 'secular canon' I am delineating is that they shed a critical light on myths of nationalism and religion. Amitav Ghosh's novels similarly emphasize the need for a secular critique of these concepts. In this recuperation of a syncretic history for the different states of South Asia, *Midnight's Children* is similar to Ghosh's novel *The Shadow Lines*, in its retelling of a communal episode whose resonance stretched across national borders, from Kashmir to Calcutta to Dhaka (then capital of East Pakistan). Both *Midnight's Children* and *The Shadow Lines* question the 'naturalized' status of Indian and Pakistani citizenship, and reveal the unfinished nature of national consolidation in South Asia.

The underlying and resilient power of religion to divide and unite above and beyond mutual expressions of 'secular' hostility is exemplified in both novels by their retelling of the same historical episode, that of the disappearance of a holy Muslim relic from the Hazratbal Mosque in Srinagar, Kashmir, at the end of 1963. Saleem links the disappearance of the relic to his grandfather, who was apparently seen, 'chugha-coated, drooling in the vicinity of the Hazratbal mosque' (Rushdie 1981: 278). Did he? Didn't he? asks Saleem. He also mentions rumours of a central government plot to 'demoralize the Kashmiri Muslims', by stealing

their sacred hair; and counter-rumour that it was Pakistani *agents provocateurs*, who stole the relic to foment unrest:

> … did they? Or not? Was this bizarre incident truly political, or was it the penultimate attempt at revenge upon God by a father who had lost his son? For ten days, no food was cooked in any Muslim home; there were riots and burnings of cars; but my grandfather was above politics now, and is not known to have joined in any processions.
>
> (Rushdie 1981: 277–8)

Finally, Saleem's grandfather dies, consumed by an internal disintegration which mirrors Saleem's later disintegration at the end of the novel.

> Doctor Aadam Aziz (*Heidelberg-returned*) died five days before the government announced that its massive search for the single hair of the Prophet's head had been successful. When the State's holiest saints assembled to authenticate the hair, my grandfather was unable to tell them the truth.
>
> (Rushdie 1981: 278)

Thus Saleem deliberately leaves the motives for the theft of the relic ambiguous: was it a political act, or a 'communal' one, or both at the same time? Rushdie reprises this narrative in a short story entitled 'The Prophet's Hair'. The story becomes a way for the narrator to reflect on the polysemic meanings of sacred objects, whose semantic field shifts sharply according to the worldview which incorporates it within its own system of belief or secular perspective. Fiona Richards remarks that the story examines the effects arising from recontextualizing these objects in alien environments, 'which is a very similar practice to looking behind them to see what their facade hides. What is hidden may be nothing … but conversely may be the ability to represent different interests in a potent appearance of absolute truth' (Richards 2000: 3). The publication of this story was also meant as an 'act of defiance against the fatwa', since it problematized the conflict between sacred and secular meaning attached to iconic objects such as the sacred hair of the Prophet.

The Shadow Lines, in narrating the same incident, similarly reveals the religious emotions that the theft of the holy relic unleashed. Ghosh's narratization of the Hazratbal Mosque theft foregrounds syncretism as an alternative form of nationalism. The syncretic culture of the subcontinent, in Ghosh's version of post-Independence Indian history, cannot be understood in terms of the logic of national citizenship. Ghosh wants to tell us that the syncretic identity of South Asia cannot be reduced to these artificial lines traced by states, the 'shadow lines' of the novel's title.

However, Ghosh's celebration of syncretism at times runs the risk of mythifying it in the sense in which rationalist secularism is mythified in *A Suitable Boy*, namely it becomes naturalized and dehistoricized. Syncretism has a very seductive appeal, in that it presents the picture of a civilization whose communities have

lived in harmony for centuries, and whose 'natural' integration was disrupted by the violent redistribution of territories in the name of competing nationalisms. But there is a risk in nostalgically idealizing the syncretic nature of traditional Indian religious life, 'a syncretism which is then understood as the basis for indigenous forms of religious tolerance and coexistence' (Mufti 1998: 115). The problem with this picture is that typically the practitioners of 'syncretic' forms of religion do not perceive them as such; it is an observation made from outside, and the communities would not conceptualize their relationship with the other communities as 'syncretic'. Intermarriage, for example, would be inconceivable for most members of these communities.

In *The Shadow Lines* there is a strong tendency to emphasize the syncretic aspect of Kashmiri religious practice. We read how the Kashmiris' reaction to the theft of the holy Muslim relic from the Hazratbal Mosque was an outrage which cut across religious boundaries; Muslims, Sikhs and Hindus *all* publicly protested against the theft of the relic. Ghosh's narrator presents the relic as a quintessentially Kashmiri symbol, shared by people of different faiths, rather than one belonging to one specific religion:

> Later, the relic was installed at the picturesque Hazratbal mosque near Srinagar. This mosque became a great centre of pilgrimage and every year multitudes of people, Kashmiris of every kind, Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs and Buddhists, would flock to Hazratbal on those occasions when the relic was displayed to the public. This is well attested, even by those European observers whose Christian sense of the necessity of a quarantine between doctrines was outraged by the sight of these ecumenical pilgrims. Thus, over the centuries, the shrine became a symbol of the unique and distinctive culture of Kashmir.
>
> (Ghosh 1988: 225)

After the theft of the relic, the narrator says, there was widespread protest from the local population:

> There were some incidents of rioting and a curfew was quickly declared by the authorities. But the targets of the rioters (and with what disbelief we read of this today) were not people – neither Hindus, nor Muslims, nor Sikhs – but property identified with the government and the police.
>
> (Ghosh 1988: 225)

How exactly does Ghosh's narrator arrive at this information? Unlike Saleem, who wants us to believe his story without providing much external corroboration (apart from unacknowledged references to Stanley Wolpert's *A New History of India*), the narrator of *The Shadow Lines* tells us that his version of events was culled from old newspapers of the time.

The probable sources for this episode do in fact sustain Ghosh's thesis of religious syncretism as a more powerful force than religious separatism, at least in

Kashmir under Nehru. But in 1963–4, state secularism was alive and well (thanks to Nehru), so that newspapers would inevitably give a 'secularist' slant to news arriving from Kashmir.[1] After nine days, the holy relic was 'found' again by Indian Central Intelligence. This is how the *Hindustan Times*, which was probably one of Ghosh's sources in writing the novel, reports the event:

> Srinagar never before witnessed such joyous crowds, which included Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs and others. Women threw off their veils and men tossed their caps and turbans. As Muslims made for mosques and Hindus blew conches, several thousand people headed towards the Hazratbal shrine six miles from here on the shores of Dal Lake to offer prayers.[2]
>
> (Anonymous 1964a: 1)

Ghosh says that in the whole Kashmiri valley there was not one single recorded incident among Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs. 'There is a note of surprise – so thin is our belief in the power of syncretic civilizations – in the newspaper reports which tell us that the theft of the relic had brought together the people of Kashmir as never before' (Ghosh 1988: 225). The narrator of *The Shadow Lines* tells us that, thanks to the leadership of Maulana Masoodi,

> forgotten and unsung today as any purveyor of sanity inevitably is in the hysteria of the subcontinent – the demonstrators took out black flags instead of green, and thereby drew the various communities of Kashmir together in a collective display of mourning.
>
> (Ghosh 1988: 225)

In the *Calcutta Statesman*, which is the probable other source paper referred to in *The Shadow Lines* ('a well-known Calcutta daily'), the theft of the relic is commented upon thus: 'Mr Nehru said he was happy that no attempt had been made to give the incident a communal colour' (Anonymous 1964b: 3).

Ghosh's retelling of the episode, by presenting us with a syncretic picture of the religious traditions of Kashmir, testifies to the 'looking-glass borders' of the subcontinental nations. Syncretism, which for Ghosh becomes an essential key for reading India's past, is of course double-edged; it shows up the unity of the Kashmiris in rising up against the government, which was seen as responsible for secreting the relic to begin with, but it also leads to riots in neighbouring states, like East Pakistan and even India, in Calcutta:

> In fact, from the evidence of the newspapers, it is clear that once the riots had started both governments did everything they could to put a stop to them as quickly as possible. In this they were subject to a logic larger than themselves, for the madness of a riot is a pathological inversion, but also therefore a reminder, of that indivisible sanity that binds people to each other independently of their governments. And that prior, independent relationship is the natural enemy of government, for it is in the logic of

> states that to exist at all they must claim the monopoly of all relationships between peoples.
>
> (Ghosh 1988: 230)

Ghosh in *The Shadow Lines* foregrounds syncretism as an alternative discourse to totalizing official secularism or ethnic particularism. This idea is further developed in his subsequent book, *In an Antique Land* (1992). Viswanathan reads Ghosh's syncretism as a nostalgia for an undivided community, in which 'the forging of national unity requires the submission to a politics of cultural identity whereby syncretism is the ideological expression of what is construed as innate'. Viswanathan locates this nostalgia for an undivided community in an essentially fictional impulse:

> The legislation of religious identity in nineteenth-century culture suggests that the nostalgia for an undivided community, which is presumed to have historically preceded the emergence of a modern nation-state (a nostalgia that in turn begets a robust anti-statism), is itself based on a fiction produced by the state as it absorbs multiple religious and cultural identities into a unified national identity. That the syncretic urge is essentially a fictional impulse is apparent even in the tropes that are employed in narratives of religious identity, such as interracial romance, conversion, discovery of lost familial roots, travel, and the return to the point of origin.
>
> (Viswanathan 1996)

For Viswanathan, syncretism, when it is not adequately historicized, is merely another version of a bland multiculturalism which denies the realities of religious difference, replaced by 'frozen icons of communal solidarity'. Viswanathan notes how words like 'composite culture' and 'syncretic civilization' obscure the 'differential, perspectival and shifting connotations of syncretism' (Viswanathan 1996).

While it might be too much to suggest that Ghosh's careful historical recuperation of Indian syncretism for the purposes of the present can be simply labelled as bland multiculturalism, Viswanathan certainly identifies a key problem in the relationship between minorities and the state, which in many ways 'exploded' with the affair surrounding *The Satanic Verses*. The worldwide repercussions following its publication are eerily prescient of the increasing tensions between Muslim communities and the British state. The following section will examine the ways in which this novel presents an even more radical take on secularism than his previous one.

Secularism and minority in Britain: *The Satanic Verses*

Rushdie focuses on the dilemmas confronting secularization and Islamic culture both in India and in Britain. In this section I wish to discuss three points relating to *The Satanic Verses* and the relationship to secularization. The first point is the

extent to which the novel is a reflection on migration and the subsequent loss or transformation of faith, where faith is to be understood as representing both religious and cultural certainties that are severely put to the test when transposed into a radically different geographical and cultural context. Secondly, I discuss the reception of the text as a prime example of the conflict between secular and religious worldviews, 'the astonishing chasm which exists between the secular and sacred worlds' that was revealed by the Rushdie affair (Yentob in Appignanesi and Maitland 1989: 196), despite the fact that the novel undertakes precisely this very thing, the unravelling and critique of any certainty, either secular or religious. This is related to the third point, i.e. the ways in which *The Satanic Verses* specifically constructs the sphere of the literary as the most apposite space to stage the debate between secular and religious, because of its radical form of secular critique.

The Satanic Verses reflects on Islam as integrally connected to migration. As a fundamentalist critic of the book, Shabbir Akhtar, remarks:

> Rushdie explores the difficulties of life in a multi-ethnic Western city, the meaning of migration, the dislocation both physical and psychological that the act of travelling entails. How do men and women cope with migration? How did Mahound cope with his migration – *hijra* – from Mecca to Medina?
>
> (Akhtar 1989: 15)

Migration is a fundamental component of Rushdie's poetics, with its accompanying trope of 'translation'. Hind Sufyan, a contemporary character in the book, reacts badly to the move from Pakistan to London, in the sense that she 'loses herself' when she goes over to England. 'Everything she valued had been upset by the change; had in this process of translation, been lost' (Rushdie 1988: 257).

Migration is at the basis of the inception of Islam as a world religion. Witness the *hegira*, when Muhammad had to leave Mecca because of the religious persecution towards the adherents of the new faith, and repaired to Medina. 'Hegira' means migration, diaspora – this is a religion that transcends nationality or ethnic provenance.

> For Muslims the word has come to mean not only a change of place, but the adoption of Islam and entry into the community of Muslims. The hijra is the transition from the pagan to the Muslim world – from kinship to a society based on common belief.
>
> (Lapidus 2002: 23)

In Rushdie's novel, Muhammad's migration is represented in the intertwined stories of Mahound's (Muhammad) revelation and recantation of *The Satanic Verses*, but also of his departure for Medina and his subsequent triumphal return to Jahilia (the fictional stand-in for the holy city of Mecca), alongside the fall from the sky and migration of the characters Gibreel Farishta and Saladin Chamcha. Rushdie thus represents the beginning of Islam as the religion of the outcasts, persecuted for their religious belief. As the historian Ira Lapidus remarks:

> Significantly, the first converts [to Islam] were *rootless migrants*, poor men, members of weak clans, and younger sons of strong clans – those people most dissatisfied with the changing moral and social climate of Mecca, for whom the Prophet's message proved a vital alternative.
>
> (Lapidus 2002: 21; my emphasis)

The notion that the first converts to Islam were drawn from the more underprivileged sections of society is also present in *The Satanic Verses*, when the poet Baal speaks of Islam as a 'revolution of water-carriers, immigrants and slaves' (Rushdie 1988: 103).

There is a constant and obsessive reworking of common themes, names and characters across the various stories, thus stretching the boundaries of the novel genre with a distinct turn to the philosophical and to matters of the spirit. The characters appear as more two-dimensional than rounded, representing ideas rather than being realistic portraits of human beings. As Malise Ruthven remarks,

> It is themes rather than characters that hold the book together; and of its central themes of faith and migration, it is faith – or its loss – that really holds the attention. The religious questions Rushdie raises are serious, even if the treatment is farcical. Religion is part of the immigrant's cultural baggage. To discard it, as many are forced to, at the port of entry, does indeed leave behind a spiritual vacuum, a 'God-shaped hole'.
>
> (Ruthven 1991: 20)

The Satanic Verses is probably one of the most heteroglot books ever written in recent times; it is difficult to pin down any one position, everything is reshuffled and all ideological and religious stances are critiqued, put under the lens of a 'secular criticism'. *The Satanic Verses* is an excellent example of 'radical secularism', characterized by a form of scepticism towards all totalizing activities, including the secular project itself. But it also thematizes the vexed issue of the loss of faith, the painful confrontation of old values with new ones, of roots versus rootlessness. The book continues the reflection, begun in *Midnight's Children*, around the question of faith and faithlessness; Aadam Aziz's inability to either believe or disbelieve is here re-enacted upon a much wider historical and geographical backdrop. Rushdie remarked, just before the proclamation of the fatwa, that the book 'is a serious attempt to write about religion and revelation from the point of view of a secular person' (Rushdie in Appignanesi and Maitland 1989: 41). He was clearly fascinated by the mystical experience of the prophet Muhammad:

> I don't believe that Muhammad had a revelation but then I don't doubt his sincerity either. Muhammad didn't make up the angel. He had that genuine mystical experience. But if you don't believe in the whole truth and you don't

> disbelieve him either – then what … is the nature of mystical experience? … That's what I tried to write about.
>
> (Rushdie in Appignanesi and Maitland 1989: 41)

The polyglossic nature of the book mixes Islamic with biblical stories. The book offers a subversive reading of the Fall of Adam and Eve:

> Woman first, and at her suggestion man, acquired the verboten ethical standards, tastily apple-flavoured: the serpent brought them a value system. Enabling them, among other things, to judge the Deity Itself, making possible in good time all the awkward enquiries: why evil? Why suffering? Why death? – So, out they went. It didn't want Its pretty creatures getting above their station.
>
> (Rushdie 1988: 342)

Rushdie's radical critique of religion did not mean a rejection of it, far from it. It is a reflection on faith, and the celebration of the satanic principle of doubt over divine certainties. *The Satanic Verses* extends its celebration of hybridity to embrace the diabolic principle over the divine principle. The apparition of Ooparvala, i.e. the 'fellow upstairs', is undistinguishable from that of Nichayvala, 'the Fellow downstairs'. The character Gibreel is confused by this apparition, who looks remarkably like Rushdie himself. But he is told that 'We are not obliged to explain Our nature to you … Whether We be multiform, plural, representing the union-by-hybridization of such opposites as Oopar and Nichay, or whether We be pure, stark, extreme, will not be resolved here' (Rushdie 1988: 329). Unlike the stiff, passive purity of the angelic nature, the devil – Shaitan – thanks to the Fall, is susceptible to transformation, and constant reinvention. Moreover, at more than one point, the reader is tempted to think that the writer of the book is the devil himself. The diabolic principle, it is suggested throughout the novel, is superior in a number of ways to the divine one, following along the lines of William Blake's satirical and desacralizing work, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. *The Satanic Verses* contains both explicit and implicit references to this text by Blake, beginning with the idea that the angelic and satanic natures are but two sides of the same coin. On the frontispiece of *The Marriage* there is the image of two figures embracing; one is emerging from the clouds, the other from the flames.[3] This image is echoed and amplified in the beginning of *The Satanic Verses*, when Gibreel Farishta and Saladin Chamcha fall from the sky intertwined, thus initiating their process of transformation: 'Gibreelsaladin Farishtachamcha, condemned to this endless but also ending angelicdevilish fall, did not become aware of the moment at which the processes of their transmutation began' (Rushdie 1988: 5). The genre of satire unites Blake's and Rushdie's dissenting texts and, like Blake's Milton, are of the 'Devil's party' when it come to taking sides – 'angels, they don't have much in the way of a will. To will is to disagree; not to submit; to dissent' (Rushdie 1988: 94–5). This concept is clearly transposed from *The Marriage*: 'Good is the passive

that obeys reason, Evil is the active springing from energy. Good is Heaven. Evil is Hell' (plate 3, Erdman 1982: 34). Aamir Mufti comments that in *The Satanic Verses*

> 'doubt' becomes a sign of resistance to the fundamentalist hijacking of Islam, a means of prying open, even if ever so slightly, the seamless whole regarding which the only *public* choice offered the contemporary Muslim is submission or disbelief. When Rushdie speaks of his sustained respect for the religious mind, this must be taken not just seriously, but as the very basis of his novel's complex engagement with the culture and politics of contemporary Islam.
>
> (Mufti 1994: 326)

Rushdie's complex experiment in the poetics of doubt, which has been almost exclusively related to his critique of an Islamic authoritarian discourse, also has interesting intertextual links with a dissenting tradition within English literature of the Romantic period. A characteristic of Romantic poetry was a renewed engagement with Milton, alongside a re-evaluation of the autonomous role of the human imagination:

> So long as God's (or Milton's) supremacy remains unchallenged, the imagination can be kept in its place, as an echo or repetition of divine creativity. But as soon as faith is unsettled, or the hierarchy begins to be dissolved, imagination starts to claim its own autonomous power.
>
> (Newlyn 1993: 225)

This celebration of the human imagination and of genius, accompanied by a radical questioning of God's supremacy, is more than evident in Blake:

> Once I saw a Devil in a flame of fire. who arose before an Angel that sat on a cloud. and the Devil uttered these words. 'The worship of God is. Honouring his gifts in other men, each according to his genius, and loving the greatest men best, those who envy or calumniate great men hate God, for there is no other God.
>
> (plates 22–3, Erdman 1982: 43)

This close connection between satanic inspiration and human imagination reappears in Rushdie's text, as in the episode when Gibreel remembers lines from Milton's *Paradise Lost* that ascribe to devilish influence his doubts about God's infallibility:

> Or could it be that the material now filling his thoughts, the echo, to give but a single example, of the lieutenant-angels Ithuriel and Zephon, who 'had found his adversary [Satan] *squat like a toad* by Eve's ear in Eden, using his wiles to reach/the organs of her fancy, and with them forge/Illusions as he

> list, phantasms and dreams', had in fact been planted in his head by that same ambiguous creature, that Upstairs-Downstairs Thing?
>
> (Rushdie 1988: 334, quoting Milton's *Paradise Lost*, 4. 800–4)

Rushdie's radical critique of religious belief cannot be simplistically categorized as insult or analysed from a rigidly liberal perspective. 'Where there is no belief, there is no blasphemy', says the narrator (Rushdie 1988: 393). Thus, in its own terms, the book could be understood as 'blasphemous' because it is not written by an atheist, but by someone who radically questions certainties of all kinds, thus by an internal critic of a sort. But also at issue is the status of the Holy Book, and the 'distortion' of its meaning within the secular genre of a novel that could be read as an attempt to rewrite the Qur'an. Islam is a religious culture of the Book, and *The Satanic Verses* needs to be understood as an intervention into that debate. The battle is for the *written word*, and the fact that *The Satanic Verses* is presented in the form of a book adds to its blasphemous connotations for some Muslims.

> For Islam is, in fact, a literary faith *par excellence*. Unlike Christianity and Judaism, it claims only one distinctive miracle – the Koran. For Muslims, the sacred scripture in Arabic is interpreted to be a miracle of reason and speech which supersedes the earlier 'sensual' miracles associated with the ministries of Muhammad's prophetic ancestors. References to the pen abound within the Koran; and Muslim civilization has accordingly sanctioned a deep respect for scholarship. The ink of the scholar, as the Prophet famously said, is holier than the blood of the martyr.
>
> (Akhtar 1989: 44)

However, as always, Rushdie's literary concepts project multiple readings precisely because they are drawn from such a vast array of cultural traditions. In this specific case, Rushdie's rethinking of the Holy Book from 'below', so to speak (together with his constant hints that the narrator is the devil himself), has an antecedent in Blake: 'Note. This angel, now become a devil, is my particular friend. We often read the Bible together in its infernal or diabolical sense, which the world shall have if they behave well' (plate 24, Erdman 1982: 24).

If the book is to be understood as satire, and as a provocative, transgressive gesture to sacralized discourse, then it is understandable why Muslims were offended by the perception that Rushdie had consciously decided to insult the life and acts of the Prophet. The Chairman for the Council of Mosques, Sher Azam, says that the book attacked Islam, because the intention of the author was hostile to Islam 'outside the book' (Ruthven 1991: 85). The novel is also, however, about the migrant experience in Britain, and the process of transformation and loss that migrants undergo in entering a new culture. On many levels, it is a profoundly empathetic novel in terms of the feelings of discrimination and humiliation experienced by immigrants, forcefully satirizing the racial politics of Thatcherite Britain. It is interesting then that the reception of the text should have provoked a polarization of British Muslims, and Muslims around the world, in fact a

strengthening and radicalization of certain positions and the campaign to promote anti-blasphemy laws in the public sphere. What occurs among Muslim migrant communities in a secularized society like Britain is the 'Islamisation of the self', i.e. the transposition/displacement of religious belonging from the surrounding social community to the private sphere of belief. Belief is thus secularized, through its relegation to the private sphere of 'affect and religious sentiment' as Viswanathan calls it (see Chapter 2). However, at the same time there seems to be a radicalization of this belief, also, perhaps, through lack of direct confrontation in the public sphere. The religious community in the host country

> often becomes a counter-weight to the secular society, as well as a place of retreat, a haven where, in contrast to the outside society, 'one is treated with respect and esteem, a place where the value and dignity of individuals are recognized – as opposed to the external society, where one often feels discriminated against and humiliated'.
>
> (Schiffauer in Ruthven 1991: 135)

Certainly the Rushdie affair helped to unify British Muslims who had previously been more fragmented along sectarian lines; paradoxically, it gave them a common platform to voice their outrage at being insulted on religious grounds. Rushdie recognizes that what happened in response to his book was the dawn of a new era of Muslim radicalism. 'I would be vain to say that I stimulated the rise of Islamic radicalism, but I was the pretext that they found, given that they were looking for pretexts' (Rushdie 2006: 11). Sher Azam, in referring to the way in which the Rushdie affair had mobilized Muslims in Britain, remarked:

> This will be useful for the future. Muslims are becoming much more united … The next generation, the third generation which is now coming up are calling themselves Muslims, not Pakistanis or Asians. They are speaking English, their culture is British, and they are Muslims. What it means, of course, is that they have decided to stay here in Britain.
>
> (Azam in Ruthven 1991: 82)

This comment is interesting on several grounds. First, the Rushdie affair was perceived as a common cause against which to unite, perhaps a rallying point of an alienated and discriminated community that identified Rushdie and his championing on the part of liberal newspapers, as the millionth attack of the West on Muslims. Secondly, it appears to indicate a trend in the development of a British Muslim consciousness that transcended ethnic and national affiliations in favour of a religious affiliation, a claim that seems to have been borne out by the statements and actions of young British Muslims involved in the 7/7 attacks in London. Thirdly, it also indicates the extent to which Islam is being constructed as an anti-Western and anti-imperialist discourse. In other words, Islam is being increasingly developed as a discourse of resistance, thus sharing some significant

traits with postcolonial discourse. Fundamentalist movements declare an anti-colonial motivation in that

> fundamentalism's critique of society is directed at neocolonial structures of domination and exploitation, and ('secular') national elites that function as comprador classes within those structures. It is able, for this purpose, to draw upon collective memories and traditions of resistance to colonialism, which are framed very often in terms of a historical struggle between Islam and the Christian West.
>
> (Mufti 1994: 319)

Of course, the link between Muslim fundamentalist guerrilla organizations and American imperialist interests has also been extensively documented.

It is thus deeply ironic that a postcolonial writer *par excellence* like Rushdie should have been partially responsible for triggering a new mode of 'resisting the West' that relies on a certain brand of Wa'habist Islam, fanatic, devout and utterly uncompromising, and espousing extreme violence and terrorism. Shabbir Akhtar, who spearheaded the campaign to ban the book in Britain, defended the importance of its banning on the grounds that 'otherwise the temper of militant wrathfulness which is essential to the preservation of religious traditions in secular society – especially a society which is aggressively secular – will be compromised' (Akhtar in Appignanesi and Maitland 1989: 229). Rushdie suggests that *The Satanic Verses* affair changed the activism of minority groups in Britain; before, it was 'largely secular left politics. That was shifting – and I guess what happened with *The Satanic Verses* helped – into a religious discourse' (Rushdie 2006: 11).

In Britain, many Muslims have found it difficult to come to terms with their religious belief on the one hand and the demands of secular citizenship on the other; nor is this process rendered easy for them by a very reductive policy of multiculturalism and an often unreflective rejection of that policy today. This difficulty may also be due to the fact that Islam does not distinguish between a secular public sphere and a private sphere devoted to belief. Moreover, state secularism in Europe and to some extent in India developed along the lines of the relationship between Christianity and the political sphere. The secularization of Islam did not proceed along the same lines, because the historical conjuncture is different. 'De-Christianization', to use Michel de Certeau's term, went hand in hand with the emergence of an ethics of Enlightenment that then took on a universalist mantle. It would be an error, then, to apply such 'secularism' to the contemporary developments of Islam:

> The ethical has to entail the universal, although it must always be accessible to a singular or a collective case. The attempt to fashion an ethical universal out of a religious base, which is subsequently not called Christian but simply secular, then goes out of joint with the conjuncture, especially with a (national)

> subject not of the monopoly-capitalist dominant. Conjuncture is a word that would give its antonym in plain English as being 'out of joint'.
>
> (Spivak 1989: 97)

More recently, Gil Anidjar has discussed how Islam is always construed as 'religion' and Christianity as 'secularism' in Orientalist and neo-imperialist discourse today; 'secularism is a name Christianity gave itself when it invented religion, when it named its other or others as religions' – the 'other' in this case being Islam (Anidjar 2006: 11). Anidjar posits a drastic, if reductive and not excessively original, series of equations between secularism, Orientalism and Christianity. After all, 'panislamism' was perceived as a serious threat to colonial rule by most European governments in the nineteenth century (van der Veer 2002: 168). Moreover, while Anidjar rightly emphasizes the 'crypto-Christian' discourse at the heart of secularism, he still leaves open the question of how to construct 'communities of communication' across religious/secular divides.

The secularization of Islam and its role in public culture have proceeded in a very different manner in India. Unlike Europe or the US, India is one of the few secular states in the world that incorporates community rights within its constitution, because it gives a separate civil code to Muslims. This fact has caused a number of high-profile conflicts between the Indian Constitution's supposedly liberal individualist principles and communitarian rights enshrined in it. In *Midnight's Children*, we see the vicissitudes that befall a secular Muslim family, through India's nationalist movement, Partition and the creation of Pakistan. Overlapping claims of identity – religious, cultural and secular – do not always provide an easy fit. It seems, at times, that a Muslim needs to leave behind a fundamental part of his/her identity, in order to adapt to a 'modern' identity. Malise Ruthven has correctly identified this dilemma as a central aspect of *The Satanic Verses*, but also as a central aspect of the reaction to it. Muslims, as represented in part by Saladin Chamcha and Gibreel Farishta, are transformed in many ways by their migration to the UK. They are transformed by the different cultural context, by British perceptions of them as foreigners, blacks, wogs. In Gibreel's case, they crack under the strain imposed by the change; he turns schizophrenic. Schizophrenia is a fundamental theme of Rushdie's migrant fiction.

The three narrative strands of *The Satanic Verses* develop in close relationship to each other, and they form an intra-textual collage of complex reflections on, and narratives of, faith. In this novel, Rushdie pushes the radical questioning of 'secular criticism' to the hilt, by offering a profoundly disturbing 'narrative of origins' about Islam that introduces doubt into the reader's mind about the veracity of Muhammad's communications with the archangel Gabriel and the integrity of his teachings. But it also opens up a fundamental question for an understanding of postcolonial reality, which goes beyond the legal framing of the question of whether it was right not to ban the novel in Britain, and beyond the obvious extremism of the *fatwa* pronouncement. (I personally defend the decision to publish it, and unequivocally condemn any death threat.) However, the ethical issue remains; countless numbers of Muslims were deeply offended by specific

passages in the book, and the question might be whether art has a responsibility, whether 'we need to come to terms with a new paradigm of accountability in the interpretation of public culture' (Jussawalla 1989: 116). As Gayatri Spivak says, 'Literature is transactional. The point is not the correct description of a book, but the construction of readerships' (1989: 87). Surely, what a book 'means' to its readers, to its community of use, is relevant to its interpretation, and ultimately, to an ethical judgement on it? Rushdie has specifically defended the sphere of the literary as an almost 'sacred space', in the sense that its freedom is inviolable, unlike other written forms of communication. Literature is identified with that productive ambivalence that allows it to recontextualize and question religious signs, but only in reference to a secular readership. In the case of the book's devout religious readership, the matter is quite different:

> In Rushdie's book, one has the comfortable sense that exactly the things that repel him from religion (or at least arouse ambiguous reactions in him): its authoritarian certainty, the childlike security it offers; that these are the things its devotees cherish. They experience exactly the same spiritual realities, and just reverse the sign.
>
> (Taylor 1989: 122)

What the book really brought into question was this construction of the literary sphere as radically secular; this assumption could no longer be tacit. Moreover, the Rushdie affair signalled a major recognition among Western commentators and critics of an Islamic public sphere that transcended nationality or ethnicity. What emerged in *The Satanic Verses* affair was what Aravamudan aptly calls the 'pathology of secularism' (Aravamudan 2006: 188). The Muslim campaigns against the book in Britain outlined how anti-blasphemy laws only applied to offences against Christian sentiment. On the other hand, the liberal public sphere tended to exhibit an orthodox and 'tone-deaf' secularism that disregarded the religionists' desire for the acknowledgement that offence had been made.

'Light versus Dark'

The Satanic Verses does not only focus on the conflicts between secular and religious identity in the British context; there is also a section in the book that deals with secularism in the context of 1980s Bombay. *The Satanic Verses* has an episode where rationalist secularism and radical secularism confront each other. A debate on the different meanings of secularism is not surprising in the novel which most famously symbolizes the conflict between secular versus non-secular readings in the contemporary literary context. Here is the position of Swatilekha, a firmly rational secularist, arguing with the poet Bhupen Gandhi about the role of secular ideology in contemporary India:

> 'These days,' she insisted, 'our positions must be interpreted with crystal clarity. All metaphors are capable of misinterpretation.' She offered her

> theory. Society was orchestrated by what she called *grand narratives*: history, economics, ethics. In India, the development of a corrupt and closed state apparatus had 'excluded the masses of the people from the ethical project.' As a result, they sought ethical satisfactions in the oldest of grand narratives, that is, religious faith. 'But these narratives are being manipulated by the theocracy and various political elements in an entirely retrogressive way.'
>
> (Rushdie 1988: 551)

The dialogue excellently illuminates the ideological differences between rationalist and radical secularists, which mainly have to do with their attitudes towards religion. However the conclusion of the dialogue also demonstrates that, whatever their ideological differences, ultimately both the rationalists and the radicals realize they are fighting on the same side, in a bid to find a way for a multi-religious and multi-ethnic nation like India to be integrated, and to guarantee equal rights to every citizen. Religious hatred and intolerance are obviously condemned by rationalist and radical alike; both agree on the need for some sort of 'universal communication', though the radical secularist is probably more sceptical about its possibility.

The passage occurs at the end of the novel. Saladin Chamcha has just come back from London to Bombay; his father has recently died, after Saladin has finally made peace with him. Saladin's friend Zeeny Vakil invites him to meet the film director George Miranda and Bhupen Gandhi the poet. What follows is a dialogue about the role of secular ideology in contemporary India. There is a discussion between Swatilekha, George's new girlfriend, and Bhupen. Swatilekha attacks Bhupen on the publication of his volume of poems 'about his visit to the "little temple town" of Gagari in the Western Ghats' (Rushdie 1988: 55).[4] Apparently the book of poems has been criticized by the Hindu right, whereas the left-wing Swatilekha finds that 'Bhupen had been seduced by religion into a dangerous ambiguity' (Rushdie 1988: 551). Bhupen defends himself: 'I have said that the only crop of Gagari is the stone gods being quarried from the hills. I have spoken of herds of legends, with sacred cowbells tinkling, grazing on the hillsides. These are not ambiguous images.' But Swatilekha is not convinced. Bhupen Gandhi answers:

> 'We can't deny the ubiquity of faith. If we write in such a way as to prejudge such belief as in some way deluded or false, then are we not guily of elitism, of imposing our world-view on the masses?' Swatilekha was scornful. 'Battle lines are being drawn up in India today,' she cried. 'Secular versus religious, the light versus the dark. Better you choose which side you are on.'
>
> (Rushdie 1988: 551)

At this point, Bhupen Gandhi gets up angrily to go. But Zeeny, Saladin's friend, manages to make him stay, saying that they can't afford schisms, 'there's planning to be done' (Rushdie 1988: 551). Swatilekha and Bhupen make peace. Swatilekha apologizes, blaming her 'excessive' college education. 'In fact, I loved the poems.

I was only arguing a case' (Rushdie 1988: 551). The exchange concludes with the narrator stating that 'the crisis had passed', and the friends go on to discuss how to go about a political demonstration in support of national integration and against communalism.

In the passage, we have a concise, illuminating representation of the debate on secular ideology in India, cast in a dialogic form. Central to the debate is the role of literature, which Swatilekha insists must have crystal clarity, since 'metaphors are capable of misinterpretation'. The ideological critic's reading of textual polysemy as a 'dangerous ambiguity', and his/her consequent value judgement on the writer's perceived lack of 'commitment', is interestingly staged in the arena of the secularism debate. Bhupen's reply to Swatilekha seems in some way to leave a space open in the literary text for an idea of religion-as-faith – namely as a way of life – as opposed to religion-as-ideology, to borrow Ashis Nandy's terminology (Nandy 1998: 321–44). For Swatilekha the opening up of the secular position to an acceptance, or at least understanding, of a lifeworld based on faith is not a possibility, not in the times they live in. It's secular versus religious, the light versus the dark.

The dialogic form of the novel permits the staging of a debate between proponents of different forms of secularism, and indicates that fiction is eminently suited for projecting a plurality of epistemological frameworks. On the one hand, it is shown that a literary text cannot be reduced to a political position, which is what Swatilekha seems to do. On the other hand, Bhupen cannot afford to leave his group of activists, to abandon the side, because his intellectual sensibilities have been offended. A poem can afford to present metaphors which allow religious faith to be considered as a significant worldview; the novel can use the dialogic form to foreground the validity of different ideological positions within a broadly secularist spectrum. Yet the conclusion shows the two characters' agreement on a position of what could be called 'practical secularism', namely a general opposition to the non-acceptance of the other, or of the minority, that characterizes hardline politico-religious positions.

The dialogue presents us with two types of secular perspectives, one more 'radical' – Bhupen Gandhi's position – and the other more 'rationalist' – Swatilekha's position. Rushdie seems to be arguing a case for a more literary perspective on secularism and religiosity, whose mutual relationship can only be construed by Swatilekha in the form of an ideological opposition. The discussion occurs towards the end of *The Satanic Verses*, almost a metaliterary comment on the apparently secularizing 'blasphemy' of the Jahilia chapters. At the end of a novel containing a desacralizing, and shocking representation of the life of Muhammad (albeit in the form of a dream), the author seems to leave some space for the validity of a religious perspective on the world, in quoting Bhupen Gandhi's (or Arun Kolatkar's) 'dangerously' ambiguous metaphors. The dialogue form also shows up the rigidities of rationalist secularism, while allowing for its political good faith. Rushdie clearly has an agnostic rather than rationalistic approach towards religion. Rushdie relegates the expression and exploration of religious belief to the sphere of the literary.

By contrast, in his essay writing, Rushdie often seems much more on the side of Swatilekha than Bhupen. In his recent writings on Islamist 'fundamentalism' in the wake of 9/11, he confirms this impression of being an out-and-out secularist, as he urges Muslim nations to relegate religion to the private sphere:

> If Islam is to be reconciled with modernity, these [moderate Muslim] voices must be encouraged until they swell into a roar. Many of them speak of another Islam – their private faith – and the restoration of religion to the sphere of the personal. The depoliticization of religion is the nettle that all Muslim societies must grasp in order to become modern. If terrorism is to be defeated the world of Islam must take on board the secularist-humanist principles on which the modern is based, and without which their countries' freedom will remain a distant dream.
>
> (Rushdie 2002: 396–7)

Rushdie here has a clear-cut rationalist secular stance, premised on an almost naïve faith in the ideal of modernity as progress. In his essay – a genre more markedly monological than the novel – he presents an unequivocal view of secularism as a necessary step in the modernization of Muslim society. By contrast, it is only through the dialogism of the novel genre that he is able to express the full complexities of the secular position in the South Asian context, through the heteroglossia of the various characters. Rushdie's more literary approach to the secularism issue in *The Satanic Verses* reveals the influence of Arun Kolatkar's poem *Jejuri* on his work.

Kolatkar's poetry provides a beautiful example of how to straddle religious and secular paradigms within literary language, and his sceptical spirituality strongly influenced Rushdie's own view of religion in *Midnight's Children* and *The Satanic Verses*. *Jejuri* is a poem, or series of poems, about a trip/pilgrimage to a temple town, Jejuri. The poems present a critique of the institutionalization and commercialization of religion, while opening up a space for spirituality. The narrator of *Jejuri* is trying to go beyond tradition, towards a point of an unconventional faith: 'You seem to move continually forward / towards a destination / just beyond the caste mark between his eyebrows' (Kolatkar 1978: 9). In the poem 'Heart of Ruin' the description of a run-down temple, full of dogs and beetles, is an apparently 'secular' evocation. Yet the poem ends with the following lines: 'No more a place of worship this place / is nothing less than the house of god' (Kolatkar 1978: 12). Metaphor in Kolatkar is used as a rhetorical tool to convey a radical pluralism of worldviews, and to effect a deliberately ambiguous reshuffling of rationalist secular and religious positions. *Midnight's Children* employs a similar type of metaphor, as when Saleem says of Bombay on the eve of Independence that 'the city was poised, with a new myth glinting at the corners of its eyes' (Rushdie 1988: 112). This metaphor brings to mind Kolatkar's lines, 'a herd of legends / on a hill slope / looked up from its grazing / when chaitanya came in sight' (Kolatkar 1978: 49). Indeed Rushdie's and Kolatkar's use of metaphor seems to serve a similar function as ways of bridging the gaps between conflicting worldviews. But what it

reveals most strongly is a shared 'poetics of doubt', nurtured in the shadow of the sacred, and constructing a dissenting, yet not atheistic relationship to belief – in other words, challenging the monolithic certainties of both rigid secularism and uncompromising religious belief.

A discussion of certain texts in the 'secular canon' of the Indian novel in English has revealed a more specific articulation of notions of secularism in relationship to representation; it has stressed how fictional and poetic representation is *integral* to the articulation of a properly critical form of secularism. Another issue has emerged which was also mentioned in the Introduction: namely the need for a 'practical' secularism that invokes it as a 'structure of accountability' in politics. Aravamudan makes an important distinction between secularity and secularism relevant to this point:

> While *secularity* as epistemic category exists everywhere alongside religious conceptions of the world, secularism is a more modern social phenomenon whose goal it is to keep religion at bay and purge its role in precise areas such as civil law, politics, and governmental policy-making.
>
> (Aravamudan 2006: 19)

As much as there may be a need for questioning the rationalist premises of secularity, and for opening up the space of enquiry to alternative, non-secular constructions of the subject (as has been discussed in Chapter 1), however, I would argue that it is nevertheless essential to sustain a commitment to secular values in contemporary political practice.

4 Allegory and realism in the Indian novel in English

Allegoresis in the secular Indian canon in English is used to develop different variations on more inclusive or more exclusive versions of national belonging, as will be examined in this chapter in reference to *Midnight's Children*, Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* (1989), *A Suitable Boy*, and *A Fine Balance* by Rohinton Mistry (1995). Here I distinguish between the term 'allegoresis' and allegory; *all* narrative accounts can be read as allegoreses, in the sense that the narrative arranges the events serving as its primary referents into a configuration, which transforms these events into a pattern of meaning that any literal representation of them as facts could never produce (White 1987: 45). In this chapter I wish to show how certain Indian novels in English, avowedly those that belong to the 'secular canon', use realism and allegory as different forms of allegoresis or narratological models for structuring their texts. Allegory acquires a new pre-eminence in postcolonial Indian fiction, emerging as a privileged technique for writers to construct a narrative configuration of events making up the nation's past, and frequently having a satirical function. An emblematic case in point is Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel*, a contemporary rewriting of the Indian epic, the *Mahabharata*, by using its events to 'fit' contemporary Indian politico-historical events, much like Joyce's *Ulysses* uses the *Odyssey*. *The Great Indian Novel* is a much more mechanical national allegory than Rushdie's, and at many points quite derivative. And yet this novel is useful to analyse as a 'textbook' example of allegory in postcolonial Indian fiction, in its creation of a hybrid genre composed of political commentary, historical interpretation of Indian nationalism, and a novel structured by myth. There are numerous intertextual allusions to Rushdie, as in the chapter entitled 'Midnight's Parents'; another indirect tribute to this author speaks of 'children being born at inconvenient times of night who would go on to label a generation and rejuvenate a literature' (Tharoor 1989: 239).

Whereas *Midnight's Children* and *The Great Indian Novel* are examples of 'allegorical allegoresis', *A Suitable Boy* and *A Fine Balance* are examples of 'realist allegoresis'. This difference can be explained by integrating Fredric Jameson's notion of national allegory with Paul de Man's contrast between allegory and symbol. The role of description in the texts is functional to their different articulation of the nation as symbol in Seth and Mistry's text, and allegory in Rushdie's and Tharoor's text. My comparisons between the novels will reveal the implications of using symbol

and allegory as tropes of the nation-space, and the affinities between allegory and satire. I will discuss the representation of crowds and mobs, which take on different meanings as metaphors for more inclusive or more exclusive notions of citizenship, in Mistry, Seth, Rushdie and Tharoor.

Allegory

The relationship between public and private in *Midnight's Children* is constantly mixed, and the narrator Saleem continuously projects his own personal vicissitudes onto those of the nation. The interpenetration of public and private in the novel, which characterizes novels about the nation, is structured through allegory. What I would like to suggest is that this constant osmosis between public and private enables *Midnight's Children* and other novels like *The Great Indian Novel* to stage a radical critique of contemporary India and the impossibility of ever containing it within a 'modular' idea of the nation-state. India's malaise is also that of every individual; in the case of a number of these narrators, at least, Fredric Jameson's famous definition of 'national allegory' holds true: '*the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society*' (Jameson 1986: 69). Though admittedly a dated discussion, Jameson's essay yields considerable productive insights for an understanding of the way in which the narrator of these texts relates to the story he is telling about India.

A Suitable Boy uses realism to project an idea of the nation-state premised on a developmental narrative tracing the coming of India into modernity, leaving its 'unmodern' past behind. The two novels present a fascinating juxtaposition between two entirely different narrative modes, the first (*Midnight's Children*) premised on the conflict between secular modernity and Indian culture, the second (*A Suitable Boy*) smoothly suturing the one onto the other. Seth's novel appears as a reappropriation of the realist mode, while Rushdie's style has been defined as fantastic realism (Cronin 1989). Both novels engage with the realistic tradition, albeit from two opposite points of view. Seth's novel presents a revisitation of realism's formal characteristics – omniscient narrator, linear chronology, psychologically coherent characters, all immersed in a 'universe of ordered significance'. Mistry's work draws on a somewhat different realist tradition from Seth's, namely the French *naturalisme* or Italian 'verismo', in which the novel presents itself as a social document and the realist method is harnessed to produce a strongly politicized form of critique.

The narratological model of *Midnight's Children*, on the other hand, is built around its oppositional relationship to the realist tradition. There is an unreliable, at times paranoid narrator, continuous digressions, disruption of linear chronology and the frantic search for narrative legitimation – the narrator's fear that his 'much-trumpeted existence might turn out to be utterly useless, void, and without the shred of a purpose' (Rushdie 1981: 152). The two texts both engage with Nehruvian ideals of nationhood, but with widely different results. *Midnight's Children* views them critically, with irony and satire – observing the life of the nation from the

outside, as it were – while Seth is writing a narrative from the inside, from the point of view of the Indian bourgeoisie, the social group that benefited most from Indian Independence. Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* is a strange, hybrid novel in its conception, working along three different storylines: the allegorical vehicle, namely the *Mahabharata*, the great Indian epic poem, Indian history and the actual plot of the novel. Tharoor adapts many episodes and characters from the *Mahabharata* to historical events and figures relating to the Indian nationalist movement and post-Independence period. What emerges is a rather artificial and abstract pastiche. For example, a central figure of the *Mahabharata*, Draupadi, who becomes the wife of all five of the Pandava brothers, becomes Draupadi Mokrasi, i.e. a stand-in for Indian democracy – a rather convoluted and often tiresome allegory.

A Suitable Boy tends to concentrate on four upper-class Indian families, and the author makes no attempt to hide the essentially bourgeois viewpoint of the narrative, which is contained in part within a progressive teleology of the nation. For Rushdie the construction of a national unity is much more problematic, as is exemplified by his avowedly unreliable first-person narrator. Saleem's possible schizophrenia breaks down the separation between private and public, which is typical of the realist novel as understood by Seth; as Jameson says of the national allegory, Rushdie does not explain the political in purely economic terms, and the personal in purely psychological ones. Saleem becomes convinced that Indira Gandhi's mass sterilization campaign during the period of the Emergency is secretly directed at him, because in the end he is sterilized as well. Saleem's paranoid delusions offer the possibility to the reader of seeing the mass sterilization campaign as a symbolic castration of India; a paranoid delusion in this case becomes a telling allegory for the state of the nation.

For Saleem, the Emergency is a measure for eliminating completely the multifarious identities that compete with the official state version of what it means to be an Indian. Saleem's obsession with the Emergency points to this event as a key point of failure in India's democratic development, and the definitive burial of Nehru's secularist ideals.

However, *A Fine Balance*, a narrative whose course of events is entirely determined by the Emergency, shows how realism, and not only postmodern techniques, can be used to denounce social injustice and simultaneously show up the betrayal of trust, and the total lack of protection, on the part of the Indian state towards its citizens. One of the worst crimes committed by the government during the Emergency was to forcibly sterilize poorer sectors of the population as part of the nation-wide sterilization campaign. Two of the novel's protagonists, the poor tailors Ishvar and Om, are forcibly sterilized just before Om's marriage. Om's testicles are actually cut off on the orders of a criminal boss who has a long-standing grudge against him, and who is helping the police in these illegal operations. None of the officials believe their protestations, which are ascribed to ignorance and mendacity. Another poor victim of a forced vasectomy tells them:

> 'What to do, bhai, when educated people are behaving like savages. How do you talk to them? When the ones in power have lost their reason, there

> is no hope.' Feeling a sharp pain in his crotch, he lowered his elbow to lie down.
>
> (Mistry 1996: 535)

Mistry's is one of the few novels that narrates events from the perspective of the dispossessed, of a lower caste person, in other words of a subaltern. It is interesting, in terms of a contrast with Seth, that Mistry rejects any equation of 'development' with progress and reason. We shall see, on the other hand, the ways in which reason is enlisted by Seth to support his view that a parliamentary democracy is the only way forward to construct the nation.

Producing meaning

In *Midnight's Children*, a critique of established ideas of the nation coincides with a critique of the novel form as a meaningful structure and of the psychologically coherent character. At the beginning of the novel, Saleem ascribes his narrative urgency to his almost paranoid fear that his story will not yield up meaning: 'I must work fast, faster than Scheherazade, if I am to end up meaning – yes, meaning – something. I admit it: above all things, I fear absurdity' (Rushdie 1981: 9). Leo Bersani remarks that

> the more leisurely stretches in realistic fiction also convey the immersion of meaning in time. The well-trained reader of novels knows when to look and listen with special care; certain meanings which inform the entire narrative are dramatized more starkly, or expressed more explicitly in the privileged moments of traditional fiction.
>
> (Bersani 1978: 52)

In *A Suitable Boy*, this 'immersion of meaning in time' also results from, or contributes to, the construction of the Indian nation as an undisputed framework. This provides a solid ideological and ethical basis for the development of the novel: the main narrative events, the dialogues, the free indirect discourse, and the direct interventions on the part of the narrator. There are some privileged moments where Seth's construction of his discourse emerges more explicitly, as in his direct comments on Nehru's political achievements. The production of a textual meaning in Rushdie is on the other hand typical of postmodern narrative, characterized by a seeming lack of general meaning: 'In a novelistic universe deprived of some governing pattern of significance, all events may be equally important. No structure of meaning is powerful enough to collect all the fragments of significance into a single system' (Bersani 1978: 52). Rushdie and Tharoor acknowledge the impossibility of a powerful structure of meaning which can connect all the fragments into a single system. Tharoor uses the *Mahabharata* as a containing device, and in some ways an interpretative tool, for structuring a narrative out of the often bewildering developments of modern Indian history. Hence he turns to allegory as the only viable narrative framework which constantly foregrounds the discrepancy between meaning and representation, as de Man says:

> The meaning constituted by the allegorical sign can then consist only in the repetition … of a previous sign with which it can never coincide, since it is of the essence of this previous sign to be pure anteriority.
>
> (De Man 1992: 207)

All four novels, as said before, are allegoreses. But they use two very different narrative strategies in order to produce the meaning of their story. *Midnight's Children* and *The Great Indian Novel* are an allegory of the diachronic development of the idea of India as a nation, while Seth and Mistry's novels are written in a realist mode that shapes the story into a symbol of national life.

Allegory and symbol

The difference between these two modes – the symbol and the allegory – is that the symbol is a naturalized trope, characterized by the unity between meaning and representation – while the allegory foregrounds the discrepancy between the world and language (De Man 1992: 187–228). According to Hans-Georg Gadamer, the symbol coincides with the emergence of an aesthetic theory that refuses to distinguish between experience and the representation of this experience. Allegory appears as rational and drily didactic, since it refers to a meaning that it does not itself constitute. It suggests a disjunction between the way the world appears in reality and the way it appears in language. The symbol, on the other hand, is Neoplatonic in that it represents an intimate unity between the image that rises up before the senses and the supersensory reality that the image suggests – 'the classical idea of a unity between incarnate and ideal beauty' (De Man 1992: 189). A symbol aspires to be a synecdoche, a part of a whole, and participating in its nature. More generally speaking, while the allegory is a temporal device – diachronic – the symbol is a spatial device – synchronic.

A productive categorization of Rushdie's and Seth's two different types of allegoresis would assign *Midnight's Children* to the sphere of the allegory, and *A Suitable Boy* to the sphere of the symbol. Rushdie's story of the emergence of the Indian nation, told through the life, and experienced on the body, of Saleem Sinai, is diachronic. It chooses as its subject the entire arc of Indian national history, from 1915, which roughly coincides with the beginnings of the nationalist movement, to 'the present', 1977. Moreover, Saleem's story thematizes a disjunction between India (as allegorized by the narrator) and the ideologies of the nation. *The Great Indian Novel* goes from the birth of the Gandhian movement to the present day. The allegory is very literal, and serves a clearly political purpose. The heroine of the tale is D. Mokrasi, or Indian democracy, born of the blind ruler Dhritarashtra (i.e. Nehru) and Lady Georgina Drewpad (i.e. Edwina Mountbatten, the wife of the last viceroy of India, who allegedly had an affair with Nehru). This hybrid, beautiful offspring eventually marries the five Pandava brothers, who represent the 'pillars' of Indian democracy. Yudhishtir is the upright if conservative politician Morarji Desai; Bhim the strong one is the Indian army; Arjun, 'the spirit of the Indian people, to which he so ably gave his voice as a journalist. India could not be

India without the loud, vibrant, excited babel of contending opinions that its free press expresses' (Tharoor 1989: 320). The twins Nakul and Sahadev are finally 'the twin pillars of India's independent governance: the administrative and diplomatic services' (Tharoor 1989: 320). 'These, then, were the five who shared Draupadi Mokrasi, who gave her sustenance and protection', proclaims the narrator, who consistently projects a clearly masculinist and strongly developmentalist idea of the Indian nation-state (Tharoor 1989: 321).

De Man establishes a connection between the symbolic and the mimetic mode, as opposed to irony and allegory. These last two tropes

> are linked in their common de-mystification of an organic world postulated in a symbolic mode of analogical correspondences or in a mimetic mode of representation in which fiction and reality could coincide.
>
> (De Man 1992: 222)

He finds that the transition from an allegorical to a symbolic theory of poetry would find its historical equivalent in the 'regression' from the eighteenth-century ironic novel – for example *Tristram Shandy* – to a nineteenth-century realism – for example *Middlemarch*. A similar trajectory can be traced by considering *Midnight's Children* as an allegory of the nation and *A Suitable Boy* as a mimesis of the nation. Seth's mimesis enacts a naturalistic correspondence between empirical and fictional time, and between a fictional and an empirical India. If we choose to read *Midnight's Children* as an allegory, then we can see the character of Saleem Sinai as the allegorical sign, which points to something – India – that differs from its literal meaning and has for its function the thematization of this difference. The language of irony, like that of allegory, asserts the knowledge of an inauthenticity:

> Whereas the symbol postulates the possibility of an identity or identification, allegory designates primarily a distance in relation to its own origin, and, renouncing the nostalgia and the desire to coincide, it establishes its language in the void of this temporal difference.
>
> (De Man 1992: 207)

Rushdie continuously asserts the fictionality of a construct such as that of the nation-state. His novel is a sustained critique of subcontinental nationalisms. Saleem, however, does not assume a totally nihilistic attitude to historical and literary narrative. His sense of urgency in telling his story reveals his simultaneous doubt about, and desire for, a narrative structure that will bestow meaningfulness on his and the nation's history. In other words, *Midnight's Children* 'both undermines and presumes the possibility of history' (ten Kortenaar 1995: 56). History is not meaningless, but it requires an act of faith, a consciousness of the arbitrary, and at the same time, useful nature of unifying representations of the nation. Especially in narrating India, whose centrifugal tendencies are continuously foregrounded in the novel, it is hard to escape the 'fascination of form', 'perhaps simply an

expression of our deep belief that forms lie hidden within reality; that meaning reveals itself only in flashes' (Rushdie 1981: 300).

The narrator of *The Great Indian Novel*, the sage Ved Vyas, is dictating his story to Ganapathi (or the elephant-headed god Ganesh). At times, the design falters, since it is not always possible to present a one-on-one correspondence between *Mahabharata* heroes and nationalist leaders. Hence a number of key episodes of the epic poem are related as dream sequences, for example the disrobing of Draupadi by the Kaurav brothers after she is won by them in a game of dice. The effect of this allegory seems to be that of Indianizing history, by relating it back to one of the founding texts of Indian culture and literature. But while *Midnight's Children* is intelligently self-conscious about its troping of Saleem as India, *The Great Indian Novel* eventually degenerates into an almost freewheeling series of reflections about India and its national character.

The discrepancy foregrounded in Rushdie's national allegory is usefully illustrated by a comparison with Seth's naturalized representation of India. In *A Suitable Boy*, the nation is an all-inclusive concept that moves from the individual to the locality, to the regional state, and arrives to embrace the entire nation. Seth invents a state, Purva Pradesh, whose regional, specifically North Indian, dimension is stretched to make it representative of India in its totality:

> … this little fire was indeed the centre of the universe. For here it burned, in the middle of this fragrant garden, itself in the heart of Pasand Bagh, the pleasantest locality of Brahmpur, which was the capital of the state of Purva Pradesh, which lay in the centre of the Gangetic plains, which was itself the heartland of India … and so on through the galaxies to the outer limits of perception and knowledge.
>
> (Seth 1993: 16)

The author constructs an organic idea of India through the microcosm of Brahmpur, the capital of Purva Pradesh. His naturalistic representation of the nation, where fiction and reality coincide seamlessly, is narrated in what can be described as the 'mimetic-symbolic' mode. For de Man, the symbol is generally seen as 'an expression of unity between the representative and the semantic function of language' (1992: 189). In the symbol the radical split between sign and referent – the disjunction inherent in language – is glossed over, elided. In this respect symbolic diction is similar to the novel's mimetic mode of representation where fiction and reality are seen to coincide. As a realist narrative, *A Suitable Boy* does not question the unity between meaning and representation.

Not surprisingly, a successful mimesis of the nation, one that would preserve the fundamentally unitary and organic nature of Seth's idea of India, depends on the invented setting. Seth's invented state, Purva Pradesh, embodies many real features of 1950s Uttar Pradesh and Bihar.[1] But Seth claims that Brahmpur is based on a mixture of Delhi, Lucknow, Agra, Benares, Patna and Ayodhya, because 'I realized quite early on that I would run into trouble if I didn't create my own city' (Woodward 1993). To anchor the novel in a real locality – Lucknow, for example

– might lead readers to point out discrepancies between Seth's representation of it and their contrasting experience of the place. The national representativeness of Brahmpur and Purva Pradesh depends on the fact that they are typical, rather than specific North Indian localities. This recalls the process of nation-forming itself, seen as an idealization and selection of historical events, religious and linguistic traditions, in order to construct an organic ideology which can claim a national representativeness. Typicality rather than specificity also characterizes Mistry's chosen settings for his novel, which include a 'city by the sea' and the village which two of his characters come from. Interestingly, like Seth, Mistry never names the village or the city, though it is obvious that it is Bombay. But again, the symbolic importance of the city in which events during the Emergency take place and irrevocably affect the lives of his characters can only be sustained by conveying the effect that this city is representative of the nation at large, just as the characters are both eminently 'true-to-life' and at the same time 'typical' of their class, caste and gender in this specific historical conjuncture between 1975 and 1977.

By contrast, all of Rushdie's localities are real, though their representation is far from realistic. *Midnight's Children* is 'shot' on many more locations than *A Suitable Boy*: Kashmir, Amritsar, Agra, Delhi, Bombay, Karachi, the Sundarbans, Dhaka, the magicians' ghetto in Delhi and then back to Bombay. Saleem is a dislocated and rootless hero, in comparison to Seth's characters, who are all products of their setting – they are fully rooted in it. Mistry's protagonists, on the other hand, are presented as stranded in the big city, each of them more or less marginalized. The realism of Mistry's style provides a fuller sense of context to the four main characters, which helps us make sense of their individual stories, and their private tragedies that are shown to spring from public occurrences and social iniquities.

Ultimately, allegory appears as the only viable formal structure for Rushdie's geographically dispersive and historically ambiguous narrative. By thematizing a split between the world of reality and that of language, as embodied by the ironic, self-conscious narrator, Rushdie is able to tell a story about India which, without presuming to be *real*, as historical accounts often do, can at least aspire to be *true*. Partition and the ensuing distortion of events by two contrasting national narratives, Indian and Pakistani, make Saleem reach the conclusion that 'what's real and what's true aren't necessarily the same' (Rushdie 1981: 79). The truth value of the ironical and allegorical modes is a product of their capacity to assert and maintain their fictional character 'by stating the continued impossibility of reconciling the world of fiction with the actual world' (De Man 1991: 218). This is why Saleem prefers the truth of memory to that of historiography; because 'in the end it creates its own reality, its heterogeneous but usually coherent version of events; and no sane human being ever trusts someone else's version more than his own' (Rushdie 1981: 211). Saleem's reliance on memory is echoed by the character Tridib in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*, when he urges the narrator to use his imagination with precision. For Tridib, 'we could not see without inventing what we saw, so at least we could try to do it properly'. And at the question, why not take the world as it is, the answer was: 'it only meant that if we didn't try ourselves,

we would never be free of other people's inventions' (Ghosh 1988: 31). Tridib's statement is borne out in the text by the narrator who does precisely that: he attempts to reconstruct his cousin's death at the hands of sectarian rioters in East Pakistan by combining historical and 'imaginative' methods of investigation.

Allegory has the capacity 'to generate a range of distinct meanings or messages, simultaneously, as the allegorical tenor and vehicle change places' (Jameson 1986: 74). Hence, in the first instance, Saleem is allegorically India, he is growing too fast, he is desperately searching for meaning, he is splitting apart under the centrifugal pressure of the many stories and identities that he has to narrate. The figure of the Widow, intent on doing away with Saleem, functions as an allegorical personification of Indira Gandhi, who in turn is an allegory or personification of India, even according to her own electoral slogan: 'India is Indira and Indira is India'. The fear of castration – later justified – haunts Saleem; the figure of the Widow, who is responsible for the mass sterilization campaigns during the Emergency, is a profoundly misogynistic image. The downside of allegory is precisely this conflation between different levels and their simplification:

> the complexities of history and circumstance may be dissolved into the simplicities of metaphysical confrontation. In allegory the forces of despotism, rapacity, lust, reason, faith, revolution and love are merely embodied in individual figures without necessarily motivating or explaining human behavior.
>
> (Sunder Rajan 1993: 111)

In the construction of the national allegory, characterization is sacrificed. In *The Great Indian Novel*, the coming of the Emergency is allegorically represented as the Siege of Hastinapur, the kingdom which the Pandav brothers are fighting for against the Kauravs. The evil Kaurav king is represented by Priya Duryodhani, i.e. Indira Gandhi, who conspires to get rid of the Pandavs in every possible way. The narrator Ved Vyas (a stand-in for the venerable Congress politician Rajagopalachari) dreams that the Pandavs' wife Draupadi is won by the Kauravs in a game of dice between Priya Duryodhani and Yudhishtir, and they try to forcibly disrobe her in front of the assembled nobles. But she invokes Krishna, and her sari magically lengthens, so that she is not left unclad. When Vyas wakes up from the dream, he realizes how 'Duryodhani and her minions had been stripping the nation of the values and institutions we had been right to cherish' (Tharoor 1989: 383). Thus a key episode of the *Mahabharata* is used as an allegory of the Emergency, interpreted as an attempt by Indira Gandhi to humiliate and do away with Indian democracy.

The literalization of metaphor in Rushdie's text is much more subtle than in Tharoor. What is traditionally metaphorical becomes literal – Saleem as the body of the nation – and what was thought at first to be literal – Saleem's ancestry – becomes metaphorical. Rushdie's use of metaphor relinquishes any claim to literal truth, and in doing so, irradiates its own truth, more ambiguous and polysemic, which requires an act of reflection, or probing, on the part of the reader. *Midnight's*

Children presents a juxtaposition of different representational modes: mythical, historical, cinematic, oral, realistic, as in his passage about the origins of Bombay. The juxtapositions, as in a postmodern pastiche, are not seamlessly blended together in the text, but overlap, giving an overall impression of discrepancy and almost 'euphoric' excess. The primeval 'world before clocktowers' of the Koli fishermen, who were Bombay's original inhabitants, is described in a lyrical prose resonant with mythical allusions:

> the fishermen … sailed in Arab dhows, spreading red sails before the setting sun. They caught pomfret and crabs, and made fish-lovers of us all … There were also coconuts and rice. And above it all, the benign presiding influence of the goddess Mumbadevi, whose name – Mumbadevi, Mumbabai, Mumbai – may well have become the city's … but then, one day in 1633, an East Indian Company Officer named Methwold saw a vision.
>
> (Rushdie 1981: 92)

Static timelessness is interrupted by the dynamics of history: 'This vision … was a notion of such force that it set time in motion. History churned ahead …' (ibid.: 92). Mythical or fabulistic time's struggle with national-historical time is identified here as the basic conflict in any attempt at a narrative representation of India. It recalls the beginning of the novel: 'I was born in the city of Bombay … once upon a time. No, that won't do, there's no getting away from the date: I was born in Dr. Narlikar's Nursing Home on August 15th, 1947' (ibid.: 9). What should be emphasized is the effect of dissonance or discrepancy between the various juxtapositions; allegory is not a naturalized allegoresis, unlike the symbol.

Describing crowds

The act of description has either a containing and shaping function – in Seth – or gestures helplessly towards the untameable multiplicity of India – in Rushdie. The nineteenth-century realist novel form constructs a myth of social order: 'The ordered significances of realistic fiction are presented as immanent to society whereas in fact they are the mythical denial of that society's fragmented nature' (Bersani 1978: 61). The centrifugal forces at work in society are signified by the looseness and elasticity of the novel form. The novel welcomes the disparate and in *A Suitable Boy* it encompasses an almost staggering variety of experience; but for Bersani, it is essentially an exercise in *containing* the looseness to which it often appears to be casually abandoning itself (Bersani 1978: 61). Thus crowd scenes in *A Suitable Boy* have the role of pointing to the immense variety and diversity of India's citizens, while channelling this multiplicity within a unifying idea of the nation. In *Midnight's Children*, on the other hand, this multiplicity is let loose, the centrifugal forces are allowed to infiltrate the novel form in such a way that the digression becomes a structural element in the text.

Saleem portrays himself at the centre of the major historical events of independent India. At the age of 10, he realizes he has a hidden gift, namely

that of being able to read minds. This magical property permits him to travel in the minds of people all over India. He proceeds to do this by entering the minds of a fat Englishwoman at the Taj Mahal, a chanting priest, an auto-rickshaw driver, a Cape Comorin fisherwoman, then gradually moving higher up in the social hierarchy: a rural landlord, the Minister of Maharashtra Morarji Desai, and finally even the Prime Minister himself (Rushdie 1981: 173–4). Saleem's supernatural ability does not extend outside the national borders, thus acting as a connecting web between the extremely varied citizens of the Indian state. There is a similar scene in *The Great Indian Novel*, when Arjun, exiled for a year from his home, travels around the country, much like Nehru did on the eve of the elections of 1935 (as recounted in *The Discovery of India*); 'He saw the range and immensity of India and all its concerns' (Tharoor 1989: 322). He travels to poor villages in the Himalayas, where he sees women tying themselves to tree trunks 'in a defiant and life-saving embrace to prevent the saws of rapacious contractors cutting them down for cheap commercial timber' (Tharoor 1989: 323). In urban Madras he marches with the pro-Tamil demonstrators. And finally, as in drought-scorched Bihar he sees a poor woman give her last drops of water to her emaciated cow, the thought strikes him 'with overwhelming intensity: "This is my land."' (Tharoor 1989: 324). In the space of three or four paragraphs, Tharoor constructs a by now familiar textual representation of India through the educated and compassionate gaze of a member of the middle class. This 'voyage through India' as a trope for fashioning an imagined community for the reader is common to these novels, though Rushdie constantly points out the fictionalizing aspect of this connecting process between the varied characters. After Saleem has visited the minds of certain Indian citizens, he experiences a sense of omnipotence:

> Because the feeling had come upon me that I was somehow creating a world … I was somehow *making them happen* … which is to say, I had entered into the illusion of the artist, and thought of the multitudinous realities of the land as the raw unshaped material of my gift. 'I can find out any damn thing!' I triumphed, 'There isn't a thing I cannot know!'
>
> (Rushdie 1981: 174)

Saleem here is reflecting on the hubris of the realist novelist and historian, which stems from the knowability of his or her object of study. Seth seems an eminent example of this hubris, in his attempt to map out an India metonymically, through an excess of detail.

Crowds in Indian novels have always played an important role, as images and metaphors of the nation, and what it contains or fails to contain. In what sense do crowds represent the 'people' is a question that haunts a number of these novels. In both, crowds are placed at strategic points of the narrative, where the narrator's idea of imagined community emerges more explicitly. In Seth, the crowd is alternately 'the people' that constitute the nation – the diversity of the crowd representing the 'unity and variety of India', to use Nehru's expression

– and what is situated outside the nation proper – the 'mob' of a riot, those who are 'not yet citizens'. Rushdie's descriptions of crowds, on the other hand, point to the uncontainability of all the different lives and stories of each individual within a unifying concept of 'Indianness'. The unifying impulse, represented by Saleem's storytelling, is always already undermined by his gradual disintegration into the millions of individuals he is attempting to represent in his story.

The first crowd scene we encounter in *A Suitable Boy* is the 'different world' of the older part of the city of Brahmpur, where the courtesans live, the riots take place and life is not regulated by the Anglicized middle-class mores of the green residential 'colonies'. All this is witnessed by Maan Kapoor, as he strolls *flâneur*-like through Misri Mandi:

> Crows cawed, small boys in rags rushed around on errands (one balancing six small dirty glasses of tea on a cheap tin tray as he weaved through the crowd), monkeys chattered in and bounded about a great shivering-leafed pipal tree and tried to raid unwary customers as they left the well-guarded fruit stand, women shuffled along in anonymous burqas or bright saris, with or without their menfolk, a few students from the university lounging around a chaat-stand shouted at each other from a foot away either out of habit or in order to be heard, mangy dogs snapped and were kicked, skeletal cats mewed and were stoned, and flies settled everywhere …
>
> (Seth 1993: 97)

Seth's great operation, in *A Suitable Boy*, is the *naturalness* of his portrayal of India. This crowd scene appears at the beginning of the novel, and it is almost as if the purpose of the walk were to *familiarize* the reader with Brahmpur, which is the main setting of the plot, the central fictional place. Familiarization is a recurrent authorial strategy in the novel and is characterized by an informative tone, which is at the same time affective, calculated to make the reader *feel at home* in Brahmpur, Calcutta and, to a lesser extent, the village of Debaria. The elements in the description of the crowd are presented with an immediacy that makes us *enter* the scene in some way, as if we were present at it, thus imbuing it with an impressionistic quality. Seth's notations are such that, as Roland Barthes says, no function, not even the most indirect, will allow us to justify: allied with a kind of narrative *luxury*, profligate to the extent of throwing up 'useless' details and increasing the cost of narrative information (Barthes 1982: 11). Seth's 'narrative luxury' betrays his urge to encapsulate the whole of reality in his novel, which Saleem Sinai recognizes as a typically Indian disease.

Crowds can also take on a darker meaning in Rushdie's and Seth's evocation of Indian reality, namely that of the crowd of the dispossessed, which, in its most extreme form, can take the shape of the mob. The mob is not so much what has failed to become a nation, but rather what the nation has failed by excluding. This aspect of the Indian crowd is like a latent terror, which comes out in certain moments of the text, during a riot or when a character loses her 'city eyes' and confronts the frightening vastness of the poor:

> When you have city eyes you cannot see the invisible people … Look, my God, those beautiful children have black teeth! Would you believe … girl children baring their nipples! How terrible, truly! And Allah-tobah, heaven forfend, sweeper women with – no! how *dreadful*! – collapsed spines and bunches of twigs, and no caste marks: untouchables, sweet Allah! … and cripples everywhere, mutilated by loving parents to ensure them of a lifelong income from begging … It's like being surrounded by some terrible monster, a creature with heads and heads and heads …
>
> (Rushdie 1981: 81)

Amina Sinai's reaction to the people around her is sympathetic and horrified at the same time. We witness how her individual perceptions of each beggar child and sweeper woman gradually merge into her perception of them as a crowd, as a collective object. This seems to be a typical feature of the representation of crowds in these two novels. It recalls Seth's narration of how a number of individuals gradually turn into a mob, by emphasizing its monstrous, inhuman aspect:

> … a few local hotheads and toughs stirred themselves and those around them into a state of rage, the crowd increased in size as the alleys joined into larger alleys, its density and speed and sense of indistinct determination increased, and it was no longer a collection but a thing – wounded and enraged, and wanting nothing less than to wound and enrage.
>
> (Seth 1993: 251)

This process of reification is achieved in both passages by describing the crowd as a 'monster', a 'thing', which is 'terrible', 'enraged'. However, Amina Sinai's sensibility makes her struggle against this reification of the poor:

> … but she corrects herself, no, of course not a monster, these poor poor people – what then? A power of some sort, a force which does not know its strength, which has perhaps decayed into impotence through never having been used... No, these are not decayed people, despite everything.
>
> (Rushdie 1981: 81)

Saleem records both Amina's initial reifying impulse and her subsequent self-criticism of her frightened middle-class reaction. This reflective act on Amina's part signals an ideological intention on the part of the author, that of individualizing for us the crowds of the poor and the marginalized. Not only that, but he is bent on mapping their stories and histories, that 'excess of intertwined lives events miracles places rumours' which Saleem indicates as the subject of his narration at the very beginning. 'I have been a swallower of lives; and to know me, just the one of me, you'll have to swallow the lot as well' (Rushdie 1981: 9). Seth's description of the mob in the streets of Misri Mandi has none of Amina's sympathy towards the dispossessed. The crowd is represented as devoid of any political motivation, beyond a sort of blind religious fury. The mob sentiments are characterized as

dangerous, in the sense that they are not geared toward nation-forming; and what the mob represents is clearly situated outside the nation-space. The mob attempts to attack the police station, but they are repelled by shots fired into the crowd by the policemen, who kill a few of them. But the whole episode is seen from the perspective of the District Magistrate who is commanding the police station. The narrative is seen through a secular, middle-class perspective; in this case, the District Magistrate, who is 'forced' to order his men to shoot at the crowd. In this scene we are led to sympathize with the national forces of law and order, even in the representation of the shooting of an unarmed crowd. The passage could be read as a text of counter-insurgency.

Mistry's take on crowds and mobs is seen from the point of view of the subaltern, of the dispossessed, of the human beings who actually form part of that crowd. As part of the Emergency's 'beautification' campaign, the slum dwellings where the tailors Om and Ishvar live are abruptly razed to the ground, and the police warn the residents to collect their belongings within thirty minutes, an order which is received 'with some scorn' by the crowd. In this passage, it is the police and the bulldozers who bring chaos, disorder and devastation to the quietly ordered lives of the people who inhabit the shantytown. There is no equation between law and superior reason as there is in Seth:

> The machines had transformed the familiar field with its carefully ordered community into an alien place. There was much confusion amid the people rooting for their belongings. Which piece of ground had supported whose shelter? And which pile of scantlings and metal was theirs to comb through? Others were turning the turmoil to advantage, grabbing what they could, and fights broke out over pieces of splintered plywood, torn rexine sheets, clear plastic.
>
> (Mistry 1995: 297)

Mistry's sympathetic realism performs a different narrative teleology from that of Seth with regards to the nation. A subaltern perspective is assumed, a convincing portrayal of the thoughts and feelings of two poor tailors who leave their caste-ridden and oppressive village only to find themselves harassed and persecuted by the very state that claims to be 'protecting' them. When they go back to the shantytown to try and see if they can somehow rebuild their home, they find billboards being put up by the government about beautification, with the workmen trying to choose between different slogans to print on the hoardings; finally, they recommend 'THE NATION IS ON THE MOVE!' (Mistry 1996: 303), a bitter ironic twist for the two dispossessed and now homeless citizens of independent India.

On the other hand, the mobs and crowds that appear in *A Suitable Boy* are all eventually contained, controlled, reined in by the forces of law and order – namely the normative force of the narrator. Take for example the passage which describes the pilgrims in the Pul Mela, a Hindu festival on the banks of the Ganges:

> Men, women and children, old and young, dark and fair, rich and poor, brahmins and outcastes, Tamils and Kashmiris, saffron-clad sadhus and naked nagas, all jostled together on the roads along the sands … all combined to give Dipankar a sense of elation. Here, he felt, he would find something of what he was looking for, or the Something that he was looking for. This was the universe in microcosm; somewhere in its turmoil lay peace.
>
> (Seth 1993: 766)

As in the first crowd scene of the novel, this crowd is seen through the eyes of a character, Dipankar, who is in somewhat comical search of the spiritual principle of life. For Dipankar the crowd of pilgrims is only superficially heterogeneous; people from different parts of India, different castes, ages and sex, are all fundamentally united by their common religion. Read like this, the scene appears as an explicitly Hindu imagining of the nation: 'This was the universe in microcosm; somewhere in its turmoil lay peace' (Seth 1993: 766). This sentence reiterates the classic definition of India as a unity within diversity, as laid out in Nehru's *The Discovery of India*:

> It is fascinating to find how the Bengalis, the Marathas, the Gujratis, the Tamils, the Andhras, the Oriyas, the Assamese, the Canarese, the Malayalis, the Sindhis, the Punjabis, the Pathans, the Kashmiris, the Rajputs, and the great central block comprising the Hindustani-speaking people, have retained their peculiar characteristics for hundreds of years, have still more or less the same virtues and failings of which old tradition or record tells us, and yet have been throughout these ages distinctively Indian, with the same national heritage and the same set of moral and mental qualities.
>
> (Nehru 1946: 49)

There is the sense, in both Seth's and Nehru's texts, that there is a nation waiting to get out, to 'come into its own'; the narrator/protagonist of the text is effecting a 'discovery' of India through his description. Nehru assumed that India was an undivided subject; Saleem, on the other hand, denaturalizes the representation of an India united by a common heritage and ideal, and shows up its fictional nature:

> a country which would never exist except by the efforts of a phenomenal collective will – except in a dream we all agreed to dream; it was a mass fantasy shared in varying degrees by Bengali and Punjabi, Madrasi and Jat, and would periodically need the sanctification and renewal which can only be provided by rituals of blood. India, the new myth – a collective fiction in which anything was possible …
>
> (Rushdie 1981: 112)

In *The Great Indian Novel*, the narrator Ved Vyas points out that India, far from being an underdeveloped country, is a 'highly developed one in an advanced

state of decay' (Tharoor 1989: 17). In order to demonstrate this, he proceeds to map the values expressed in *Mahabharata* onto modern India, reaching some very interesting conclusions about the Hindu concept of 'dharma' at the end of his book. The ending of the novel, and Ved Vyas's philosophical meanderings, tend towards the utopian, by reinforcing a rather singular idea of India: what is unpleasant about India is not 'really India', it seems. 'Whatever our ancestors expected of India, Ganapathi, it was not this. It was not a land where dharma and duty have come to mean nothing' (Tharoor 1989: 411). But the novel's discourse about 'Indian values' is complex; though there is a recuperation of concepts like dharma and duty, presumably in an attempt to render current what could be perceived as enduring civilizational values, on the other hand the novel ends with a drastic re-examination of dharma from a resolutely secular perspective. Yudhishtir comes to realize that 'there are no classical verities valid for all time'. He wants the gods to 'accept doubt and diversity', and to admit that 'there is more than one Truth, more than one Right, more than one dharma' (Tharoor 1989: 418). His is a straightforwardly secular epic of India. What we witness in these novels is the emergence of an English-language corpus of works that construct an ongoing political debate about India as a secular democracy and the role of colonialism in religious divides. Tharoor emphasizes the precolonial secularism of India:

> At any rate … we had never taken our social differences into the political arena… . No, Ganapathi, religion had never had much to do with our national politics. It was the British civil serpent who made our people collectively bite the apple of discord.
>
> (Tharoor 1989: 134)

He ascribes the Indian elite's failure to implement a modern democratic project to colonial rule and its creation of separate electorates for Muslims and Hindus: 'If you want to know why democracy is held in such scant respect by our present elite, Ganapathi, you need only look at the way it was dispensed by us by those who claimed to be its guardians' (Tharoor 1989: 135).

The construction of character

The central dialectic of the realist novel is played out between its will to establish a myth of social order, and its inevitable recognition of the centrifugal forces that fragment society. This is certainly true of *A Suitable Boy*. The ramifications of the plot testify to the vastness and diversity of its narrative material. The aim of this seems to be that of rendering the widest, and therefore most representative, portrait of Indian life within the novel form. But the plethora of information has to end somewhere, and there is a controlling and limiting function at work in the text, as a safeguard against a downward spiral into endless detail. This controlling and limiting function is generally well hidden from the reader, and becomes most apparent in the conclusion of the plot.

Indeed, the ending of a realist novel is probably its least realistic part. Here, in truth, the efforts of the narrator to create a unified and meaningful whole out of the *tranche de vie* he has chosen to represent are most evident. This is because the realist novel is structured as a teleological progression, and the denouement is therefore a key element in marking the achievement of the narrative goal. However, in *A Fine Balance*, teleological progression is distinct from a faith in progressiveness as in *A Suitable Boy*. The two novels can be seen to hark back to different traditions of realism in this regard. *A Fine Balance* is comparable to Emile Zola's naturalism, and to his notion of the 'experimental novel' as a way of applying scientific techniques of observation to literature. For Zola, the novelist is in search of a truth, and knowability of the human subject is posited as the ultimate aim of the novel. He describes the naturalist novel as an experiment that the writer must perform on man, with the help of observation (Zola 1880, in Ceserani and De Federicis 1986: 837). Clearly, positivist thinking and determinism played a fundamental role in shaping the aesthetic of the naturalist novel of the late nineteenth century. Mistry seems to develop a specific form of determinism in his own novel; the tragic fates of all the protagonists of *A Fine Balance* are closely observed, and provided with a chilling chain of causality that squarely assigns responsibility for their ruined lives to the Indian state, as well as to pre-existing social iniquities. Thus Mistry's narrative teleology is similar to Seth's in that both novels are ultimately premised on a belief in knowability and rationality. The novel, in their hands, is what Marthe Robert describes as a 'medium of progress, an immensely efficient instrument which, in the hands of a conscientious novelist can become a real public asset' (2000: 64). However, Mistry uses realism to much more radical ends, in the sense that it denies the reader any catharsis or any comforting forms of closure. Moreover, unlike much social realism and more along the lines of Zola and the Italian realist writer Giovanni Verga, Mistry's novel never reverts to populism, or a romanticization of the underclass. He is certainly very ambivalent about the viability of a progressive ideology for India, since ultimately the state fails its citizens, and human solidarity is all that remains. Those who are better off try to help those lower down on the food chain, though exploitation and hypocrisy are realistically woven into the representation of this solidarity. Thus Beggarmaster, who casually exploits Ishvar and Om, ends up helping Dina Dalal and the tailors stay in their flat. The refusal to pronounce a direct judgement on the material being portrayed and the stylistic precept of impersonality produce a wonderful aesthetic effect in terms of realism, precisely because Mistry is not conveying a strong progressivist view in the novel.

A Suitable Boy, like many realist novels, also ends in marriage, which is how it began. As in *Middlemarch*, the most melodramatic and unrealistic events happen towards the end of the novel. Maan Kapoor stabs his best friend Firoz because he thinks he is having an affair with his mistress, and he is put in jail. In an improbable twist, Firoz survives the stabbing, forgives Maan and does not press charges; so Maan is released. Lata makes up her mind about which of the three suitors she will marry, and her wedding is the final important event of the novel. The shy and insecure Varun miraculously passes his interview, and becomes a

member of the Indian Administrative Service. Throughout the novel's closing pages, we are treated to a good deal of irony, as if the narrator is gently poking fun at his own attempts to tie up the numerous threads of his plot. Indeed, what perhaps distinguishes the narrator of *A Suitable Boy* from that of *Middlemarch* is the former's self-conscious humour in relation to form, coupled with an affection for his characters that makes them appear all part of a vast extended Indian family. In *A Fine Balance*, the narrator employs the metaphor of the quilt being sewn by Dina Dalal for the vicissitudes of her life and her attempt to distinguish a pattern out of the sad events that make it up. But the young student Maneck Kohlah, who is her boarder, vehemently denies any pattern to these events:

> But now I prefer to think that God is a giant quiltmaker. With an infinite variety of designs. And the quilt is grown so big and confusing, the pattern is impossible to see, the squares and diamonds and triangles don't fit well together anymore, it's all become meaningless. So He has abandoned it.
>
> (Mistry 1996: 340)

Dina tells him that he is talking nonsense, but by the end of the novel, she realizes that she no longer has the strength to keep adding to the pattern, and indeed to finish the quilt at all. When she is finally deprived of her hard-won independence from her domineering brother Nusswan and is forced to go back and live with him and his wife Ruby, she realizes that the important events of her life are over. Though Ruby offers to provide the last extra bit of cloth to complete the quilt, Dina declines; she 'had already decided that there was nothing further to add' (Mistry 1996: 573). However, unlike the nihilistic Maneck, who fails to see any pattern in the tragic events that befall him and his friends, and who eventually commits suicide, Dina continues on living, eking out some form of existence. The last scene shows her sharing a laugh with the two tailors, Ishvar and Om – they have both been forcibly sterilized, the former no longer has any legs, and the latter has been castrated, and they are living precariously by alms. But the narrator highlights the resilience of the three at the end of the novel. Dina's quilt still provides her with a modicum of sense to her life, through the medium of memory:

> At night in bed, she covered herself with the quilt and took to recounting the abundance of events in the tightly knit family of patches, the fragments that she had fashioned with needle, thread and affection. If she stumbled along the way, the quilt nudged her forward. The streetlight through the open window was just bright enough to identify the motley of its making. Her bedtime story.
>
> (Mistry 996: 573)

Dina, in the course of the novel, constructs a sort of family for herself out of the people who more or less through chance and circumstance come to live under her roof, though they belong to widely differing social groups and are initially extremely hostile and suspicious of one another. The two tailors employed by Dina

are made homeless, so she eventually takes them in. Maneck Kohlah is a paying guest who is studying at the university. The narrator describes with great sympathy and lyricism the growing proximity and intimacy of these very different Indians, by focusing on the way in which Dina gradually gets used to sharing a bathroom with the tailors, who were known as 'chamars' in their home village, but who left for the city and for a new life after their family dies in an act of horrific upper-caste violence. But they all get used to one another and 'The enlarged household turned the wheel of morning with minimal friction' (Mistry 1996: 387). However, 'the thought of their bodies in her bathroom still made Dina uncomfortable. She was watchful, waiting to pounce if she found evidence that her soap or towel had been used' (Mistry 1996: 387). As time goes on, she realizes that 'the pattern of each day … was like the pattern of a well-cut dress, the four of them fitting together without having to tug or pull to make the edges meet. The seams were straight and neat' (Mistry 1996: 388). These four people assume a symbolic significance in the novel which is akin to that of the four families at the centre of Seth's plot. They become a microcosm of the narrator's secular perspective on India; there is no guarantee that this secular coexistence and harmony will survive for very long, but there is a utopian drive in the narrative that holds it up as an alternative possibility. Deepika Bahri, in relation to another novel by Mistry, *Such a Long Journey*, remarks on the 'mortifying limits of both secularism and aesthetic representations of tolerance in the face of unaddressed social needs' (Bahri 2003: 139). And yet Om, Ishvar, Dina and Maneck's little community of sorts represents the fragile secular bulwark against the multiple onslaughts of the power of the state under the Emergency and gender oppression in the form of Dina's brother Nusswan. A remark by Mistry in an interview reveals the provisional and utopian aspect of his idea of India:

> There's no national culture. But that's all right. What keeps India together is, I think, the idea of India as a secular nation, where different languages, different cultures can co-exist peacefully. Or not so peacefully, sometimes.
> (Mistry in Smith 2002)

The family is an important component in the construction of a realist plot, and possibly points to an osmosis between public and private that questions Jameson's rigid binary that he says is characteristic of the realist novel. The use of family history acts as a mooring point in realism and as a classification of information about the various characters. Indeed, the main branches of Seth's banyan-like plot consist of four Indian families, and all the events of the story can be reconnected back to these characters. The Indian extended family becomes a central metaphor; it has many different members, but they are all classified and find their place in the hierarchy. Thus the members of the Chatterji family are all distinguished by their urbanity and sophisticated command of English – their belonging to the Calcutta Brahmos (an enlightened sect of Hinduism) is the basic 'grammar', or semantic code, for understanding the various characters of Amit, Kakoli, Meenakshi, Mr Justice Chatterji, etc.

The same goes for the Mehra family, though Lata Mehra is curiously opaque, given her role as heroine of the novel. Seth definitely shares with many nineteenth-century novelists 'a reassuring belief in psychological unity and intelligibility' (Bersani 1978: 61). Such a belief helps to keep at bay the potential fragmentation of Seth's picture of Indian society, and thus Lata does not marry outside of her caste, though the sympathy of the romantic reader tends to go to Kabir, the Muslim boy she is in love with, rather than to the prosaically cheerful Haresh Khanna, her mother's choice. Lata's choice restores the family harmony, which had been disrupted at the beginning, when her mother found out that she was interested in a Muslim. Lata's intelligibility as a character – namely that of an Indian girl of good family – remains intact, thanks to her wedding to Haresh. The social pattern of the novel is ultimately recomposed.

In *A Fine Balance*, social order is also restored, albeit very tragically. Om and Ishvar who have tried to change their hereditary profession as tanners and trained to become tailors, and have left their village to try their luck in the big city, are mutilated by the cruel 'family planning' of the Indian state, and reduced to the condition of beggars. Dina Dalal, who after remaining a widow has tried to maintain her economic autonomy, is shown as a defeated and subdued figure. When Maneck goes to visit her again after eight years, he is shocked at the 'stick-wristed figure' in front of him; 'the grey in her hair had thoroughly subjugated the black' (Mistry 1996: 604). Maneck is extremely pessimistic about the future – so much so that after visiting Dina and learning of the tailor's horrible fate, he commits suicide by throwing himself under a train. But his pessimism is counter-balanced by the optimism of the three 'oppressed' characters, Dina, Om and Ishvar. The documentary impulse emerges quite strongly in Mistry's writing and a sense of urgency dominates the narrative. The novel self-consciously performs a social function towards its readership, by offsetting a clearly utopian gesture towards the India 'that could be' against the 'India that is'.

As in many realist novels, in *A Suitable Boy*, disruptive desire is central to the development of the plot. Indeed, if Lata hadn't fallen in love with Kabir at the beginning, her mother would not have felt the need to accelerate the search for a suitable boy for her. Around the same time, Maan Kapoor falls in love with the courtesan Saeeda Bai when she comes to give a performance in his father's house. Desire in the novel is disruptive of the social order eminently represented by Mrs Rupa Mehra. One can also read desire as a highly individualistic emotion that has no place in traditional Indian society. If the characters' final choices are any indication of the novel's underlying ethical assumptions, then it is clear that the preservation of family relationships appears more important than the individual 'pursuit of happiness'. Lata's self-realization must come after her mother's peace of mind, and the moment she finds out that Kabir is Muslim, she 'knows' she cannot marry him. The impossibility of Lata and Kabir's union is presented to the reader in such a way as to appear final, though we are kept in suspense about Lata's final decision for another 1250 pages. Generally, the novel's 'domestic narrative' – the parts of the story regarding the Chatterjis and the Mehras – tends towards the preservation of the status quo, and the resolution of conflict within

the boundaries of the family. Unlike the Western *bildungsroman*, which often documents a character's quest and discovery of his or her self, and his or her needs and aspirations, Seth's novel celebrates the importance of the great god family over the values based on individualism.

Desire appears as a trigger for action, and yet is ultimately stifled, because of its capacity to wreak havoc. Lata owns that Kabir has a devastating effect on her: 'when I'm with Kabir, or even away from him but thinking about him, I become utterly useless for anything. I feel I'm out of control – like a boat heading for the rocks – and I don't want to become a wreck' (p. 1419). This rather trite expression of Lata's feeling reveals, in my view, the difficulty the author has in explaining his heroine's choice of husband. It seems as if desire has no place in a successful marriage. The ending of the novel might validate Bersani's claim that 'realistic fiction admits heroes of desire in order to submit them to ceremonies of expulsion' (Bersani 1978: 67).[2] Above all, a novel like *A Suitable Boy* seems to want to do away with ambiguity of motives and plot, though it does not always succeed. Bersani finds that, as desire becomes more radically disruptive of established orders, the novel tends to become less realistic and more allegorical, and the reader encounters a certain resistance in the text to complete psychological intelligibility of the characters and a perfect teleological ordering of the plot.

In this sense the plot and characters of *Midnight's Children* seem to confirm the inverse proportion between the unleashing of desire and the preservation of the status quo within the novel form. Saleem's story, which also corresponds to his family story, is full of misalliances, incestuous loves, betrayals, farcical – markedly untragic – deaths. Saleem is not really the son of his parents, he falls in love with his own sister and his son is fathered by another man. Traditional narrative events such as the birth of the protagonist, the family history and relationships between the characters are turned upside down.

In *The Great Indian Novel*, the unusual sexual alliances and multiple partners of the Hindu epic are used to good comic effect to describe the saga of the Congress Party and its major players. The disfunctional nature of the 'Great Indian Family' of the *Mahabharata*, comprising the rival families of the Kauravs and the Pandavs, scores strong allegorical points. For example, Karna is the illegitimate son of Kunti, the mother of the Pandav brothers. He is a good allegory for Jinnah, who breaks away from the Congress-led nationalist movement – the 'Kuru party' in the novel – to head his own Muslim party. The allegorical message is that Jinnah's movement shares the same origins with the Congress variety of nationalism, but it is its illegitimate, marginalized offshoot.

The narratological model of *Midnight's Children* is built around its oppositional relationship to the realist tradition. Saleem's losses of memory and gradual physical disintegration show up his differences from Seth's psychologically coherent characters. At a certain point of the novel, Saleem sets aside the first person and speaks of himself in the third, a technique of estrangement that is intended to foreground his amnesia and his departure from his previous self after the death of his family. In this part of the novel Saleem observes himself from the outside, as if

he were simply another character in the book, rather than the narrator. He stops being the centre of consciousness until he regains his memory:

> So I must doggedly insist that I, he, had begun again; that after years of yearning for importance, he (or I) had been cleansed of the whole business; that … I (or he) accepted the fate that was my repayment for love, and sat uncomplaining under a chinar tree; that, emptied of history, the buddha learned the arts of submission, and did only what was required of him. To sum up: I became a citizen of Pakistan.
>
> (Rushdie 1981: 350)

Saleem points out the limitations of the traditional novelistic narrator, bound by the constrictions of syntax, which doesn't allow more than three persons in the singular. He realizes he is 'only a broken creature spilling pieces of itself into the street, because I have been so-many too-many persons, life unlike syntax allows one more than three' (Rushdie 1981: 463).

Simultaneity and allegory are ways of invoking those who have been excluded from citizenship by a more normative nationalist narrative such as *A Suitable Boy*. This novel postulates an underlying unity between the people and the state through the use of a symbolic-mimetic mode of representation. Thus in Seth's and Rushdie's poetic economy, symbol and allegory come to signify the alternating exclusivity or inclusivity of their national idea. The next chapter will explore the different notions of the historical sense and the configuration of national history in Seth, Rushdie, Ghosh, Tharoor and Mistry.

5 The historical event in the postcolonial Indian novel – I

Parallel developments: history and fiction

Indian English fiction of the 1980s and 1990s is characterized by a renewed interest in history, questioning both the role and methods of historical writing founded on European models of conceptualizing the past. These European models were appropriated, but not entirely transformed, by the nationalist writers who provided a hegemonic historical narrative for postcolonial India. In the novels of the 1980s and 1990s, the narrator more self-consciously takes on the role of historian, trying to recuperate events of the past that were excluded or suppressed from the official nationalist narrative. This new historical novel in English developed in parallel with recent trends in Indian historiography, represented by the *Subaltern Studies* collective of historians. The original project of the *Subaltern Studies* group was grounded in a Marxist perspective:

> It is the study of this historic failure of the nation to come to its own, a failure due to the inadequacy of the bourgeoisie as well as of the working class to lead it into a decisive victory over colonialism and a bourgeois-democratic revolution of the classic nineteenth-century type … it is the study of his failure which constitutes the central problematic of the historiography of colonial India.
>
> (Guha 1988: 43)

Subsequently, *Subaltern Studies* historians distanced themselves from Marxism, and moved towards a markedly post-foundationalist approach, in the tradition of Nietszche, Derrida and Foucault. Chakrabarty, for example, uses this passage by Guha to show how both nationalist and Marxist interpretations of Indian history assume a paradigmatic transition narrative, 'of which the over-riding (if often implicit) themes are those of development, modernization, and capitalism' (Chakrabarty 2000: 32). When judged by these modular notions of history, the Indian historical process is viewed as grievously incomplete. British historians were the first to impose a homogenizing transition narrative on Indian pasts from a medieval period to modernity. Chakrabarty notes that the present incarnations of

'medieval' and 'modern' in Marxist and nationalist historiography are the terms 'feudal' and 'capitalist'.[1]

Both novels and historiography attempted to think around or beyond the modular form of the nation-state, in their recuperation or retrieval of a different form of writing about the past:

> Historiography and the novel are tied together as genres which continually return to figure the Indian nation as the site of an incomplete or fractured modernity. The desire to find some third form of writing … to reproduce this fracturing not as a grievous lack in the nation but as something different or as a supplement which challenges the authority of its master narratives of nation and modernity, has been as much a part of the novel – at least since Rushdie – as it has been a part of historiography at least since *Subaltern Studies*.
>
> (Mee 1998: 146)

Midnight's Children inaugurated a post-foundationalist approach in its 'imitation of history', that projected a significant influence on the writers of Rushdie's generation (Merivale 1995: 329). For a better understanding of how these writers narrate India to us, it is important to identify what are the versions of history that circulate in their novels. Many Indian novelists of Rushdie's and Seth's generation enter into a dialogue with Nehru: and both *Midnight's Children* and *A Suitable Boy* have significant intertextual links with *The Discovery of India*. Their two very different reworkings of the Nehruvian national narrative yield opposite ideas of how to represent the past. Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, Mistry's *A Fine Balance*, Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel*, Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* and Seth's *A Suitable Boy* ask to be read as 'imitations of history'. However, each adopts different methods of historical recuperation, which in turn derive from their different notions of historical sense: the one genealogical, the other metaphysical, in Nietzschean terms later taken up by Foucault. Whereas Seth recuperates and rewrites nationalist history for the 1990s, Rushdie appropriates and parodizes Nehruvian metaphors of the nascent nation-state, in order to question the nationalist interpretation of history to be found in *The Discovery of India*. I focus on the notion of event in order to compare different ways of 'imitating history'. I draw on theories of the event to analyse the truth-claims of narrative regarding both history and fiction. I compare Rushdie's and Tharoor's historical interpretations to the post-foundationalist and non-elitist approach of the *Subaltern Studies* historians. A fixed point in my analysis of the novels is their constant intertextual allusions to Nehru and how the events depicted in each novel differ from or replicate the nationalist concept of 'historical event'.

What is an event?

Midnight's Children engages in a debate with Indian historical writing on the issue of *representation* of an event – either fictional or historical – by foregrounding the underlying narrativity, and therefore the symbolic or allegorical foundation, of

such national history. The historical sense in the novel is genealogical: ‘the forces operating in history are not controlled by destiny or regulative mechanisms, but respond to haphazard conflicts’ (Foucault 1977: 154). On the other hand, *A Suitable Boy*, far from questioning issues of representation, can be compared to ‘foundational fictions’ such as *The Discovery of India*, for the ideological objective underlying its configuration of events. It presents itself as a sort of narrative of origins of the Indian nation-state. Seth’s historical novel is ‘metaphysical’ in Foucault’s terms:

> In placing present needs at the origin, the metaphysician would convince us of an obscure purpose that seeks its realization in the moment it arises. Genealogy, however, seeks to reestablish the various systems of subjection: not the anticipatory power of meaning, but the hazardous play of dominations.
>
> (Foucault 1977: 148)

The historical sense in *Midnight’s Children* illustrates Nietzsche’s critique of history as elaborated by Foucault: ‘a history whose perspective on all that precedes it implies the end of time, a completed development’ (Foucault 1977: 152). Saleem Sinai’s idiosyncratic allegory of history can be said to be genealogical in the sense in which it is marked by an absence of teleology. Genealogy, unlike a metaphysical approach to history, does not pretend to restore an ‘unbroken continuity’ of a buried or forgotten national past; which is the approach Nehru takes in *The Discovery of India*. The duty of genealogy

> is not to demonstrate that the past actively exists in the present, that it continues to secretly animate the present, having imposed a predetermined form on all its vicissitudes. Genealogy does not resemble the evolution of a species and does not map the destiny of a people.
>
> (Foucault 1977:146)

The way in which Saleem constructs his version of the Indian past questions a historicist approach, indeed questions the entire secular foundation on which history is erected. The historical sense permeating *Midnight’s Children* is far from being the ‘slow exposure of the meaning hidden in an origin’. The parody of the historical novel effected by *Midnight’s Children* seeks to undermine the power of history to shape our sense of self.

Seth’s and Rushdie’s representation of key historical events aptly illustrates their different approaches to history. Understanding the notion of event can help to determine where historical and fictional narratives intersect. Veena Das, in speaking of the attacks on Sikhs that took place in Delhi after Indira Gandhi’s assassination by her Sikh bodyguards, uses François Furet’s definition of a ‘critical event’ as an event that institutes a ‘new modality of historical action which was not inscribed in the inventory of that situation’ (Das 1995: 5). After the events in Delhi, new modes of action came into being, which redefined traditional concepts

such as purity and martyrdom; it also redefined traditional roles of women, certain castes and the nation as a whole.

Midnight's Children creates a deliberate discrepancy between the history Rushdie 'goes to' and his fictional narrative. The history he quotes verbatim is Stanley Wolpert's *A New History of India*, and the historical narratives he is deflating are underscored by colonialist and nationalist ideologies. His political target is Indira Gandhi's government, and more specifically the Emergency, seen as the final let-down of the secularist and democratic imagining of the Indian nation-state envisioned by Nehru. The novel also contains a fiercely satirical indictment of Pakistani military dictatorships, and the farce-like evocation of the military occupation of East Pakistan by Pakistani troops.

Foucault, along similar lines to Furet and Das, speaks of the event as possessing a 'universal singularity'. He assigns a great importance to the notion of event as a way of disrupting metaphysics, and he is at pains to dissociate the event from any web of causality, thus radically critiquing any attempts to construct a philosophy of history. Indeed, Foucault invites us to imagine the fabricated nature of this system of causality, presumably established by the work of 'traditional historians':

> Let us imagine a stitched causality: as bodies collide, mingle, and suffer, they create events on their surfaces, events that are without thickness, mixture, or passion; for this reason, they can no longer be causes. They form, among themselves, another kind of succession whose links derive from a quasi-physics of incorporeals – in short, from metaphysics.
>
> (Foucault 1977: 173)

When we speak of a 'battle', for instance, as an event, we are actually imposing a coherence and a unity to a heterogeneous group of individual actions, none of which constitutes the battle as such. The notion of battle is a phantasm, i.e. 'an effect of meaning' that hovers over the surface of the event like a cloud, but 'not identifiable with anything in the event as such' (Young 2004: 119). Foucault defines the event as 'a point without thickness or substance of which someone speaks and which roams the surface of things' (1977: 174). He radically redefines how we are to conceive of the notion of event and its attached meaning; certainly not as the 'cognitive core' of a 'knowable object', which will furnish us the correct interpretation of the event. Rather, the meaning flows 'at the limit of words and things', it is incorporeal and never physical, because 'it is that of which we speak as always past or about to happen and yet it occurs at the extreme point of singularity' (Foucault 1977: 174). The event and the concept that might serve to explain it are always characterized 'by a severed and double affirmation' (Foucault 1977: 177). The event is constituted in thought through repetition as a 'phantasm', which Young defines as 'a simulacrum that brings the event into being at the moment when language and event coincide' (2004: 119). Through this redefinition of the notion of event, Foucault also redefines the task of philosophy, and of course, historical writing. It must do away with the illusion of identifying similarities and correspondences between events with the aim of producing a coherent

epistemological system in which they can be situated, and thus explained. In this sense Foucault speaks of a 'pure event', which is pure difference; and *not* as 'assimilated in a concept, from which we vainly attempted to extract it in the form of a *fact*, verifying a proposition, *of actual experience*, a modality of the subject, of *concreteness*, the empirical content of history' (Foucault 1977: 180). This notion points the way to a thought functioning in its 'extreme singularity', instead of seeking to discover generalities underlying difference. Moreover, Foucault's redefinition of the notion of event, linked to his recuperation of Nietzsche's substitution of history with genealogy, has a very important political function that can serve to rewrite the past from a radical perspective. He believes that by substituting the genealogical series with history, 'the writing of history itself can become a disruptive event and consequently a form of political intervention' (Young 2004: 120). Foucault denounces the use of 'historical continuities' in history and literature, because this approach wrongly assumes that an understanding of the events of the present can only be achieved through the past, which seems to have been specifically developed to clarify the present:

> We have employed a wide range of categories – truth, man, culture, writing, etc – to dispel the shock of daily occurrences, to dissolve the event. The obvious intention of those famous historical continuities is to explain; the eternal 'return' to Freud, Marx and others is obviously to lay a foundation. But both function to exclude the radical break introduced by events.
>
> (Foucault 1977: 220)

There is a 'dangerous aspect' to the event, which those in power seek to occlude, and to dissolve in the 'continuity of power maintained by this class' (Foucault 1977: 221). Whereas the working class aims to give rise to an event which is *not* contained by historical continuities, but is rather an utterly revolutionary occurrence, devoid of any connection to past or future. In this sense, then, the representation of 'riots' in Indian postcolonial fiction can be read in two different ways. Depending on the ideological overtones of the narrative, the 'riot' can be presented as a negative event that disrupts the orderly unfolding of the nation's development. Or, it can acquire a life of its own, a disruption of a 'singular universal nature' that makes us rethink the categories of nationhood, citizenship and secularity. The revisitation of the past that seems to be a primary concern of Indian novels of the 1980s and 1990s effects an anti-philosophy of history, by questioning the way meaning has been assigned to past events in nationalist historical writing. Mukul Kesavan's novel *Looking through Glass* (1995) illustrates this point very well. The present-day narrator is shot back in time, to the India of 1942, at the time of the Quit India movement. He finds himself caught up in the midst of nationalist uprisings of all sorts, but always as a sort of passive spectator, as if looking through glass at the insensate play of historical actors. Moreover, he views these events with hindsight, with a certain smugness, as one who is knowledgeable about what made 'history' and what didn't. As he is being kidnapped by a group of nationalist rebels, the narrator thinks along the lines of Foucault's metaphysical historian:

> There was reason to panic – I had been shanghaied in the name of the Nation and pressed into serving a doomed rebellion. When they wrote the histories of this time, even the most chauvinist of them would have to record that the rebellion's back was broken inside a month. I was risking my life for a movement that would fail quite nicely without any help from me. And then to learn from a toad like Ratface that the sequence or chain or … train of events that had slotted me into this luggage van need never have happened … it was enough to make the Laughing Buddha brood.
>
> (Kesavan 1995: 104)

What this cleverly constructed historiographical metafiction shows is the complete arbitrariness, and indeed randomness, of events that have been sacralized and in many ways essentialized by Indian nationalist history. There is a simultaneous desire to address the lacks of nationalist historiography, and to provide an alternative mode of rethinking the Indian past. What we find in these novels is a genealogy of the nation at work, the radical disjunction between event and meaning.

Foucault critiques any attempt at philosophy of history, as he does the phenomenological approach. For him, phenomenology reoriented the event with respect to meaning – the two never coincided; 'and from this evolves a logic of signification, a grammar of the first person, and a metaphysics of consciousness' (Foucault 1977: 175). Phenomenology placed the event 'before or to the side of meaning – the rock of facticity, the mute inertia of occurrences – and then submitted it to the active processes of meaning, to its digging and elaboration' (Foucault 1977: 175). Paul Ricoeur's exploration of the 'event' exemplifies this phenomenological and hermeneutical approach. But notwithstanding Foucault's position on this, I think Ricoeur is useful for an understanding of how discourses about truth circulate in Rushdie and Seth's novels. Later post-structuralist theorists, such as Hayden White, develop further the notion of event in Foucault, while divesting it of some of its radicalism.

White and Ricoeur both found their notion of historical event on its narrativity – it is their narrative structure that distinguishes historical from natural events (which lack such a structure) (White 1987: 171). Ricoeur recognizes that 'the word "history" preserves in many languages the rich ambiguity of designating both the course of recounted events and the narrative that we construct' (Ricoeur 1981: 294). Both Ricoeur and White defend the truth-claims of narrative history as opposed to non-narrative history such as that of the French *Annaliste* school. For White,

> the very distinction between real and imaginary events that is basic to modern discussions of both history and fiction presupposes a notion of reality in which 'the true' is identified with 'the real' only insofar as it can be shown to possess the character of narrativity.
>
> (White 1987: 6)

Therefore, truthful representations of reality, according to White and Ricoeur, are premised on their narrativity. They are both far from dismissing history as text – they do not dissolve its referent into mere textuality. Rather, the 'real' referent of history is similar to the Kantian *noumenon*, the thing-in-itself which can only be known through its phenomenal manifestations. Similarly, historical events come to us through their narratives. In this sense, then, Ricoeur and White read events as texts.

How can an event be read as a text? For Ricoeur, an event is a 'meaningful action', which is the object of the social sciences. If meaningful action can be shown to have some of the features of a text, then it follows that the human sciences – including history – are hermeneutical, 'inasmuch as their methodology develops the same kind of procedures as those of *Auslegung* or text-interpretation' (Ricoeur 1981: 197). Unlike the intentionality of an utterance, in written discourse the author's intention and the meaning of the text cease to coincide. Moreover, the text – as opposed to spoken discourse – is non-situational and non-ostensive. The referent of literature is the world, no longer the *Umwelt* (the environment) which was the referent of the spoken discourse:

> To understand a text is at the same time to light up our own situation … It is this enlarging of the *Umwelt* into the *Welt* [world] which permits us to speak of the references *opened up* by the text – it would be better to say that the references open up the world.
>
> (Ricoeur 1981: 202)

Ricoeur's claim is that meaningful action can become an object of science through a kind of objectification similar to the fixing which occurs in writing. In the same way that writing becomes detached from its author, an action can get detached from its agent and have consequences of its own (Ricoeur 1981: 210). An action is a social phenomenon because it can have effects that it was not intended to have by its original agents. Historical events are a prime example of this. Historians are often hard put to isolate the role of a historical character in the course of events.

Just as written discourse is the mark of the utterance, so history can be said to be the record of human action. Thus 'human action becomes social action when written down in the archives of history' (Ricoeur 1981: 207). Just as a text breaks free of its ostensive references and develops a 'world', so the meaning of an important event transcends the social conditions of its production. Ricoeur's point here is to show that an event, just like a text, is an open work, and therefore the meaning of an event is the sense of its forthcoming interpretations (Ricoeur 1981: 208–9). For Ricoeur, procedures of validation in literature and the social sciences have a polemical character, much like claims made in court:

> In front of the court, the plurivocity common to texts and to actions is exhibited in the form of a conflict of interpretations, and the final interpretation appears as a verdict to which it is possible to make appeal.
>
> (Ricoeur 1981: 212)

Finally, Ricoeur sees the moments of explanation and understanding as parts of the 'hermeneutical circle' – one moment leads to the other, and vice versa. He cites the case of structuralism, which claimed to be able to explain a text through a detailed analysis of its structure. But analysis could never stop at a mere exposition of the structure, without an investigation into a 'depth-semantics', the 'ultimate referent of the myth' under analysis. To understand a text is to follow its movement from sense to reference, from what it says to what it talks about (Ricoeur 1981: 218). It is to go beyond mere structural analysis to an exploration of the world that the text opens up.

Having determined the structural similarity between event and text, it remains to be seen in what ways fictional and historical narratives intersect. White and Ricoeur show up the importance of plot in historical narratives as a way of endowing events with meaning. Ricoeur finds that plot is an essential structural element in a historical narrative, as much as in a literary or mythic one. Any narrative is composed of a chronological dimension, called by Ricoeur the episodic dimension, which answers the question, what happened next? It is the sum of the events in the story. But to this must be added a non-chronological dimension, the so-called configurational dimension, which constructs meaningful totalities out of scattered events. In order for an event to be historical, it must be more than a singular occurrence. It must have a place in a configuration, in a narrative:

> The art of narrating, as well as the corresponding art of following a story, therefore require that we are able *to extract a configuration from a succession* … in grasping together events in configurational acts, the narrative operation has the character of a judgement and more precisely of a 'reflective' judgement in the Kantian sense of the term.
>
> (Ricoeur 1981: 278–9)

The difference between history and fiction is that history deals with real events and fiction with imaginary ones. For Ricoeur, the exchange between these two opposed referential modes is what brings our historicity, or historicality, to language. The difference in the plot of a historical narrative as opposed to a fictional one is that, given that real events are the content of historical stories, then the form in which historical events are presented should seem to be 'found', rather than put there by narrative techniques (White 1987: 21).

The chutnification of history

Saleem Sinai continuously shows up the plotted nature of the narrative. History is shown as a method for fictionalizing experience, founded on the illusion of a centred consciousness capable of giving formal coherency to the world he perceives: 'But this is to mistake a "meaning" (which is always constituted rather than found) for "reality" which is always found rather than constituted)' (White 1987: 36). Saleem views the telling of his own story as a desperate search for meaning, which alone can give a form to his life and which must be accomplished before the

complete dissolution of his own body. Saleem continuously emphasizes the perils of mistaking meaning for reality, of substituting a 'found' plot for an invented one in the configuration of historical events. Saleem's incessant allegorizing in the novel is a delirium with social and political overtones. Saleem's occasional posturing as a dispassionate chronicler of his life and time satirizes the point of view of the historian, who is supposed to have an 'analytical and unprejudiced eye'. The recent history of the subcontinent has, in effect, been made the target of many differing, yet reportedly 'objective' interpretations, which all stake a claim to be the most veridical version of events. Newspapers play an important role in the shaping of national versions of Indian and Pakistani history. Nowhere is this more evident than in an episode of Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* (1988), in which the narrator retraces an event, the riots of 1964, that took place in Calcutta, which he experienced as a young boy. But these riots seem to have been erased from the history books and from the memories of his fellow students at university. In the narrator's search for evidence that the riots actually happened, he scours the newspapers of that period. At first, he only finds evidence of riots taking place across the border, in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). But then he looks at the news of the following day, and reads a huge headline stating '*Curfew in Calcutta, Police Open Fire, 10 dead, 15 wounded*' (Ghosh 1988: 224). Clearly, the two riots are linked, despite their occurring in different countries, though it is the narrator who has to piece the evidence together, while the newspapers report the riots as seemingly unrelated events. They are occasioned by the theft of a sacred relic in Kashmir (this episode has already been discussed in Chapter 3). The riots in East Pakistan end up killing the narrator's cousin Tridib who happens to be travelling in Dhaka at the time, partly because he is in the wrong place at the wrong time. The newspapers in Calcutta, where Tridib was from, had not reported the details of the riots, and hence Tridib travelled to East Pakistan, though it was dangerous, 'since in that paper there was not the slightest hint or augury of the coming carnage' (Ghosh 1988: 227). After all, this is a Calcutta newspaper, so why should it report events happening across the border? 'It was, after all, a Calcutta newspaper, run by people who believed in the power of distance no less than I did' (Ghosh 1988: 227). And yet, asks the narrator, how could the journalists and politicians *not know* what was going on? And if they knew, why couldn't they speak of it?

Given the distortion of events in Pakistani and Indian official narratives, historical objectivity is profoundly questioned by the nameless narrator of *The Shadow Lines*, who attempts the impossible task of putting into words what these narratives elide. In part this omission is because these events are impossible to interpret: 'for to look for words of any other kind would be to give them meaning, and that it is a risk we cannot take any more than we can afford to listen to madness' (Ghosh 1988: 228). Filling in the gaps of this silence is novelistic discourse that attempts to address them in a way that history cannot (I am reminded of Mee's definition of the novel as a 'third form of writing', mentioned earlier in this chapter). The novel is structured around the narrator's attempt to reconstruct a family tragedy, namely the mystery surrounding the death of his cousin; his methods of 'investigation'

are effected through memory, family stories and a constant confrontation with historical or 'official' narratives, in other words through dialogism.

In *Midnight's Children*, Saleem's 'historical' explanations for the Indo-Pakistani war and for the Emergency are consciously made to appear the fruit of a paranoid and grotesque imagination. For this reason his story is manifestly not a history, which entails stylistic exclusions, such as the religious and magical events, and 'the kinds of "grotesque" events that are the stuff of farce, satire, calumny' (White 1987: 66). These exclusions set limits on what constitutes a specifically historical event: in effect, history writing entails a disciplining of the imagination. Whereas historical narrative privileges the so-called middle style of declamation, fictional narrative has complete freedom over the styles it adopts. *Midnight's Children* emphasizes the essential supplementarity provided by fictional narratives, by definitively blurring the boundaries not only between fiction and history but between 'serious' narrative and farce. Saleem's version of history is more catholic than that of the historian Stanley Wolpert – it includes magical events and prophecies. He is effecting the chutnification of history, which includes many disparate ingredients:

> I am able to include memories, dreams, ideas, so that once they enter mass-production all who consume them will know what pepperpots achieved in Pakistan, or how it felt to be in the Sundarbans … Believe don't believe but it's true. Thirty jars stand upon a shelf, waiting to be unleashed on the amnesiac nation.
>
> (Rushdie 1981: 460)

In *The Great Indian Novel*, the method of 'investigation' is that of adapting the *Mahabharata* to structure a narrative about recent Indian history. Tharoor presents his story as a conscious and overt political allegory, unlike Saleem, whose allegory is both overstated and 'unconscious' at the same time. But Ved Vyas, the narrator of *The Great Indian Novel*, shares Saleem's disavowal of any objectivity in his narrative:

> This is my story of the India I know, with its biases, selections, omissions, distortions, all mine. But you cannot derive your cosmogony from a single birth, Ganapathi. Every Indian must forever carry with him, in his head and heart, his own history of India.
>
> (Tharoor 1989: 373)

A defining characteristic of historical or 'historiographic' novels of the 1980s and 1990s, of which *Midnight's Children* and *The Great Indian Novel* are two examples, is that they consistently represent India as a locus of conflicting and multifarious narratives. This postmodern trope surfaces again and again, leaving the reader with a strong sense of a discrepancy between the imagined community constructed in the novels and statist narratives that tend to subsume all other forms of imagining the nation.

The philosophy of history of novels such as *Midnight's Children*, *The Shadow Lines*, *The Great Indian Novel* places an emphasis on its inherent narrativity, much like Ricoeur and White. It is important to add, however, that just because both are narratives does not mean that history is somehow 'dissolved' into fiction, into a general relativism and radical uncertainty about our pasts. On the contrary, our constitution as temporal beings can only be brought to expression in narrative form: 'the historicity of human experience can be brought to language only as narrativity' (Ricoeur 1981: 294). Moreover, this narrativity can be articulated only by the crossed interplay between history and fiction. In other words, both referential modes are necessary for our historicity – also translated as historicality, or 'within-time-ness' – to be brought into language. This intersection between fiction and history is a vital exchange, emphasizing the narrativity of history, while at the same time drawing attention to the mimesis inherent in fiction. To recognize the values of the past as different to those of the present is an opening up of the real towards the possible, according to Ricoeur. For him, there is only a history of the potentialities of the present; the imaginative potential contained in the present of which the historian takes full advantage (Ricoeur 1981: 295).

White points out that the purpose of the historical narrative is not dispelling false beliefs about the past: 'what it does is test the capacity of a culture's fictions to endow real events with the kinds of meaning that literature displays to consciousness through its fashioning of patterns of "imaginary" events' (White 1987: 45).

In other words, historical truth depends on its narrativity, yet precisely because of this characteristic, it is of a different order from scientific truth. Saleem does not doubt history's veracity (or that of fiction, for that matter), but rather the value of its pretended objectivity:

> One day, perhaps, the world may taste the pickles of history. They may be too strong for some palates, their smell may be overpowering, tears may rise to eyes; I hope nevertheless that it will be possible to say of them that they possess the authentic taste of truth … that they are, despite everything, acts of love.
>
> (Rushdie 1981: 461)

Saleem's position might be said to be similar to Ricoeur's concluding question: 'Could we not say, in conclusion, that by opening us to what is different, history opens us to the possible, whereas fiction, by opening us to the unreal, leads us to what is essential in reality?' (Ricoeur 1981: 296).

Historical intertexts in *Midnight's Children: A New History of India*

Midnight's Children is postmodern in the sense that it incorporates different narrative genres – historical writing, fiction, oral tales – in order to circumscribe their validity, or at the very least to equalize them. From about 1947 onwards, Saleem's narrative is punctuated by passages from Stanley Wolpert's *A New History of India*

that are quoted almost verbatim in the text. This text helps to provide a chronology of the nation parallel to that of Saleem Sinai's life-and-times. It also provides a containing structure for the myriad directions in which the text could escape, beginning with the narrative possibilities offered by stories of each of the 582 children born at midnight of 15 August 1947. Rushdie's constant use of Wolpert appears as another example of that 'national longing for form', expressed here through the parodic or often merely instrumental incorporation of a standard textbook version of Indian history. Incorporating *A New History of India* – almost as if Saleem has the book by his bedside as he is writing down his story – is a way of countering Saleem's anxiety that his 'much-trumpeted existence might turn out to be utterly useless, void, and without the shred of a purpose' (Rushdie 1981: 152). Rushdie incorporates the historical source into the text by leaving it to speak for itself in parenthetical clauses: its information 'undigested', unprocessed by the narrative voice.

Wolpert's is an 'official' history, with a well-defined narrative form: 'established origins, narrative watersheds, and an agreed-upon chronology of significant events' (ten Kortenaar 1995: 42). It focuses on an account of major political movements and characters, the 'official history' that makes parenthetical appearances within Saleem's saga, designed to keep his story 'on track'. It follows Gyan Pandey's definition of a 'standard historiographical procedure'. Since the nineteenth century, this procedure appears to have required taking a prescribed centre (of a state formation, of a nation-state) as one's vantage-point and the 'official' archive as one's primary source for the construction of an adequate 'general history' (Pandey 1998: 29).

If Wolpert presents a standard interpretation of South Asian history in this regard, then Rushdie's narrative of historical events such as Partition shows an interest in recuperating a history from below. The historians Ayesha Jalal and Sugata Bose place responsibility for Partition on the shoulders of the prime movers of the Indian Congress Party, especially Nehru. They claim that the leader of the Muslim League, M.A. Jinnah, was 'forced' into opting for a 'moth-eaten' Pakistan through the greed for central power on the part of the Congress, which was 'ready and eager to take power at the British centre at the price of partitioning Bengal and Punjab' (Jalal and Bose: 1998: 184). Jalal and Bose's and Wolpert's accounts of the transfer of power are to some extent elitist, because they focus on the intricate negotiations at a high political level that ultimately led to Partition. *The Great Indian Novel* also provides an elitist representation of the transfer of power, by presenting the key Indian political players – Jinnah, Nehru, Gandhi, etc. – through epic heroes. Jinnah becomes the illegitimate Pandav brother, Karna, who is clamouring for a 'Karnistan', i.e. a 'Hacked-Off Land'. Nehru is the blind king of the Kauravs, Dhritarashtra (presumably because Nehru was considered by many to be a 'blind idealist'); Gandhi is Bhishma, the great sage who took a vow of celibacy. The novel provides an explanation for why Karna/Jinnah left the Congress Party: 'Karna [Jinnah] was not much of a Muslim, but he found Gangaji [Gandhi] too much of a Hindu… . And Gangaji's mass politics … embodied an atavism that in his view

would never take the country forward' (Tharoor 1989: 142). The conflation of epic with history contrives to write the role of mass politics almost entirely out of the historical/allegorical narrative presented in the book.

Pandey emphasizes the need for historiography to look at the pressure exerted on politicians by the militant mass movements of the period, for example the sectarian strife that began in August 1946 in Calcutta and then spread to eastern Bengal, Bihar and other provinces. This may have played a decisive part in bringing about Partition. Pandey reads Jalal's and other 'elitist' historians' conceptualization of Partition as a way of 'Othering' the history of sectarian strife, so that it is not perceived to be a part of 'real' Indian history.

Pandey's appeal for a more inclusive history of Partition, which will take into account the lives and experiences of the people who lived through the time and not only depict the crisis of the nationalist leadership, seems to be consonant with Rushdie's depiction of Partition, which does not concern itself so much with assigning responsibility to this or that politician as in showing it up as the first and crucial failure of the 'optimism disease' – one of the terms used by Saleem to define the non-sectarian nationalism represented by Mian Abdullah.

The moment in Indian history known as 'the transfer of power' is explicitly allegorized by the transfer of Methwold's Estate to the Sinais and other middle-class families. Saleem's telling of the story gives a version of events in which it appears that India went directly from the hands of the British into the hands of the comprador class. The so-called brown sahibs retained the social customs and the administrative structures of the British as a condition for the transfer of power into their hands: 'because the price, after all, was right' (Rushdie 1981: 98). At a first reading, it might seem that, for Rushdie, the ruling elite of the new Indian Union merely substituted that of the Raj. However, a closer look at the dialogue between Methwold, the departing British imperialist, and Ahmed Sinai, the member of the Indian comprador class, tells a different story. The dialogue between Methwold and Ahmed alternates with that of Ahmed and his wife, who is appalled at Methwold's conditions, namely that they are not allowed to change anything in the house before the transfer of property, which will be completed on midnight of 15 August 1947. 'And look at the stains on the carpets, janum; for two months we must live like these Britishers? You've looked in the bathrooms? No water near the pot. I never believed, but it's true, my God, they wipe their bottoms with paper only!' (Rushdie 1981: 96). Amina Sinai cannot believe that she is forced to keep everything the same when the house has now become legitimately hers. She has 'somehow escaped the subtle magic of Methwold's Estate, remaining uninfected by cocktail-hours, budgerigars, pianolas and English accents' (Rushdie 1981: 100). Amina Sinai can be read as an allegory for the indigenous component of the Indian brand of political democracy, which will inevitably make its own changes in the administration structure inherited by the British; but also as a gendered reaction to the male structure of power handed over from the British colonizer to the Indian (male) elite.

Historical intertexts in *Midnight's Children: The Discovery of India*

Saleem's story continues an important tradition in Indian English writing – which was to have a notable influence on the novel of the 1980s and 1990s – that of the 'public' autobiography, or the autobiographical history. Other examples of this writing are Nayantara Sahgal and Jawaharlal Nehru. Gandhi's *Autobiography, or the Story of my Experiments with Truth*, originally written in Gujarati, is probably the most well-known Indian autobiography of the independence movement. In their works, their life-story is shown to be closely interwoven with the life and evolution of the nation, especially in Nehru's *The Discovery of India* and Sahgal's memoir *Prison and Chocolate Cake* (1954). A closer look reveals the startling extent to which Rushdie has appropriated some of the framing statements used by Nehru to connect his history of India to his personal experiences, in order to create a completely different national allegory. Yet at the same time, this comparison reveals the important influence Nehru's prose and ideology had on the writing of *Midnight's Children*.

The way Rushdie satirizes key Nehruvian tropes such as the nation personified, the discovery of national identity as a psychoanalytic process, the characterization of India as an essential unity within diversity, exemplifies in his text the effective failure of the nationalist project, and at the same time its enduring appeal. While for Nehru these are positive metaphors, making up an optimistic narrative – his faith that India will find herself, and that she will fulfil her destiny – Rushdie turns them into problematic and disturbing tropes. By making Saleem's body itself the nation, Rushdie literalizes the Nehruvian metaphor of the nation as a living organism. India, Nehru says, has known the innocence of childhood, passion of youth, wisdom of maturity, etc.:

> and over and over again she had renewed her childhood and youth and age. The tremendous inertia of age and size have weighed her down, degrading custom and evil practice have eaten into her … but behind all this lie the strength of ages and the sub-conscious wisdom of an ancient race.
>
> (Nehru 1946: 142)

Nehru also identifies with India as a living organism and its history as a living process:

> Because my own personal experiences have often touched historic events and sometime I have even had something to do with the influencing of such events in my own sphere, it has not been difficult for me to envisage history as a living process with which I could identify myself to some extent.
>
> (Nehru 1946: 9)

In *Midnight's Children* this identification of an individual life with that of a nation and its history as a 'living process' is developed to a parodic – or paranoid – extent:

> at the precise instant of India's arrival at independence, I tumbled forth into the world. There were gasps … thanks to the occult tyrannies of those blandly saluting clocks I had been mysteriously handcuffed to history, my destinies indissolubly chained to those of my country.
>
> (Rushdie 1981: 9)

Not unsurprisingly, in the novel it is Nehru himself who says to Saleem, in a letter at his birth, that his life 'will be, in a sense, the mirror of our own' (Rushdie 1981: 238). Indeed, both narrators – Saleem and Nehru – are looking for the meaning of present-day India in the past. Both works have a tangential relation to historical writing; in both, the 'plot' is very much visible, in Rushdie through his paranoid and self-conscious narrator, in Nehru through his explicitly ideological refashioning of India's past in terms of nationalism. Both narrators feel too close to past events to write about them 'dispassionately', namely to adopt the 'middle style' of rhetoric that White identifies with historical writing. For Nehru,

> The past remains; but I cannot write academically of past events in the manner of a historian or scholar … I do not possess the mood for that kind of work. The past oppresses me or fills me sometime with its warmth when it touches on the present, and becomes, as it were, an aspect of that living present …. I can only write about it, as I have previously done, by bringing it in some relation to my present-day thoughts and activities, and then this writing of history, as Goethe once said, brings some relief from the weight and burden of the past. It is, I suppose, a process similar to that of psychoanalysis, but applied to a race or to humanity itself instead of to an individual.
>
> (Nehru 1946: 22)

A new genre of memoir is being forged, where the 'discovery' – or rather invention – of the nation is being written as a *bildungsroman*, much as other novels belonging to the 'secular canon'.

In Nehru, the discovery of India's identity is a psychoanalytic process. It reflects Nehru's self-conscious metaphor of the nation as an individual, a metaphor that Rushdie appropriates by parodizing it. Nehru is at pains to declare the metaphorical nature of his personification of India: 'It was absurd, of course, to think of India or any country as a kind of anthropomorphic entity' (Nehru 1981: 46). This precisely is what Rushdie does, making this absurdity into his own brand of irony in *Midnight's Children*. In his novel, Saleem's childhood traumas become literally those of the nation, beginning from the moment of his birth, where he is exchanged for someone else, to when he discovers, at the age of 10, that he is not the son of his parents.

Nehru's intentions, as he sets out to write *The Discovery of India*, consist of a search for India's past. It is, effectively, a recreation and reinvention of the past for the purposes of the present, to bring to light an Indian national consciousness. Indeed, Nehru takes on the role of the analyst, who has to strip off the layers of false consciousness and colonial domination: 'The 180 years of British rule in

India were just one of the unhappy interludes in her long story; she would find herself again; already the last page of this chapter was being written' (Nehru 1946: 39). This is necessary in order to bring to light India's essential character, by adding modernity in the process:

> I approached her [India] almost as an alien critic, full of dislike for the present as well as for many of the relics of the past that I saw I was eager and anxious to change her outlook and appearance and give her the garb of modernity. And yet doubts arose within me. Did I know India? – I who presumed to scrap much of her heritage? … surely India could not have been what she undoubtedly was, and could not have continued a cultured existence for thousands of years, if she had not possessed something very vital and enduring, something that was worthwhile. Where was this something?
>
> (Nehru 1946: 37)

This is what the book endeavours to find out. India becomes the subconscious whose hidden workings must be brought to light. Nehru then continues the psychoanalytic metaphor, with himself in the role of analyst, 'on a great voyage of discovery':

> She [India] was like some ancient palimpsest on which layer upon layer of thought and reverie had been inscribed, and yet no succeeding layer had completely hidden or erased what had been written previously. All of these existed in our conscious or subconscious selves, though we may not have been aware of them, and they had gone to build up the complex and mysterious personality of India …
>
> (Nehru 1946: 46)

India's essential unity can only be recuperated if her preceding historical traumas – such as colonialism – can be worked through, which is what Nehru proceeds to do in his book, by rewriting Indian history from a nationalist perspective. The process of undigging, of 'discovering' the underlying essential unity, becomes one of the objectives of this writing about India. It is a proactive history, geared towards the future of the nation. As Rumina Sethi says, 'It is in the establishment of the link between past and future that nationalism finds its sustenance' (Sethi 1999: 20). Nehru is hard at work to establish a common ancestry for the people of India, which can then be used to build a naturalized representation of a motherland. The past thus becomes a convenient tool for defining the future of the nation, the directions it will take, Nehru's 'tryst with destiny'.

Nehru uses the psychoanalytic metaphor for structuring his nationalist conception of Indian history. Nationalist historiography had inherited the Orientalist structuring of India's past, though it attributed a much greater centrality to the Indian agency obscured by colonial histories. British Orientalist texts of the nineteenth century, such as James Mill's *The History of British India*, divided the Indian past into periods and construed its present as a regress or decline from

a golden age. According to these accounts, the golden age of Hinduism came to represent India's highest level of civilization, her 'true self', comparable to Graeco-Roman antiquity. It was succeeded by a medieval period of disunity, which contributed to the Muslim political conquest of India, and brought about the present degeneration of Indian society (Inden 1990: 117). Nehru is also convinced that India has departed from her past splendour and must be restored to this state, via a modernizing nationalism. Nor are Indian novelists immune to these Orientalist conceptions of the Indian past, as we read in *The Great Indian Novel*:

> I tell them that if they would only read the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, study the Golden Ages of the Mauryas and the Guptas … they would realize that India is not an underdeveloped country but a highly developed one in a state of advanced decay.
>
> (Tharoor 1989: 17)

For Nehru, the decay of the Indian nation is more due to inner failure than to external attack, a civilization that has 'worked itself out' and has nothing more to offer the world. What Nehru aims at is to introduce some 'essential qualitative variation of that culture' – namely to give India 'the garb of modernity'. So he has a double objective: one, uncover the essential nature of India, by distinguishing it from decay and external contamination, and two, fashion this nature to fit his modernizing and secularizing idea of the nation-state.

Rushdie turns Nehru's essentializing metaphors about India upside-down, and literalizes them. Ultimately, Saleem is overwhelmed by the sheer multitude of individual voices struggling to find expression and representation – both literary and political – in the Indian 'body politic' allegorized by his cracking, bursting limbs. India is not contained within the political and conceptual boundaries imposed upon her by nationhood. This is the conclusion Saleem reaches at the end of thirty-one years of Independence – the ultimate failure of the nationalist project, the civil war with Pakistan, the Emergency of Indira Gandhi ('the reign of the Widow'). Nehru implicitly – and at times explicitly – recognizes the mythopoetic nature of his nation-forming enterprise:

> Whether there was such a thing as an Indian dream through the ages, vivid and full of life or sometimes reduced to the murmurings of troubled sleep, I do not know. Every people and every nation has some such belief or *myth of national destiny* and perhaps it is partly true in each case.
>
> (Nehru 1946: 42)

Midnight's Children reiterates and expands this concept at the moment of India's birth as a modern nation:

> a country which would never exist except by the efforts of a phenomenal collective will – except in a dream we all agreed to dream; it was a mass fantasy shared in varying degrees by Bengali and Punjabi, Madrasi and Jat,

> and would periodically need the sanctification and renewal which can only be provided by rituals of blood. India, the new myth – a collective fiction in which anything was possible …
>
> (Rushdie 1981: 112)

Nehru, in the opening sections of his work, continuously stresses the 'tremendous' and 'obvious' diversity of India: 'it lies on the surface and anybody can see it … There is little in common, to outward seeming, between the Pathan of the North-West and the Tamil in the far South' (Nehru 1946: 48). He establishes a typically romantic dialectic between surface diversity and inner unity, which is not conceived in terms of 'a standardization of externals or even of beliefs. It was something deeper and, within its fold, the widest tolerance of belief and custom was practiced and every variety acknowledged and even encouraged' (Nehru 1946: 49). This dialectic between surface and interior is turned inside-out by Saleem's self-conscious recognition that 'Indians have a national longing for form'. Saleem is not denying the need of national myths – he is fully aware of the enduring power of this mass fantasy, and to a large extent he is a wholehearted Nehruvian. Indeed, in the case of Pakistan, the narrator strongly advocates the substitution of a new myth for the old one (Islam): 'liberty; equality; fraternity' (Rushdie 1983: 51). What Rushdie has clearly taken from Nehru is the importance of the imaginative strength of this national myth, the need for it to have a strong hold on the imagination of the people in order to construct a solid nation-state. This is the problem with Pakistan, that it was *insufficiently imagined* (which may also be why *Shame* is a much darker novel than *Midnight's Children*):

> It is possible to see the subsequent history of Pakistan as a duel between two layers of time, the obscured world forcing its way back through what-had-been-imposed. It is the true desire of every artist to impose his or her vision on the world; and Pakistan, the peeling, fragmenting palimpsest, increasingly at war with itself, may be described as a failure of the dreaming mind. Perhaps the pigments used were the wrong ones … or perhaps the place was just *insufficiently imagined*, a picture full of irreconcilable elements … Urdu versus Punjabi … a miracle that went wrong.
>
> (Rushdie 1983: 87)

The passage contains two intertextual allusions to Nehruvian metaphors. The first is his evocation of India as a palimpsest – 'She was like some ancient palimpsest on which layer upon layer of thought and reverie had been inscribed, and yet no succeeding layer had completely hidden or erased what had been written previously'. The second is Nehru's conceptualization of national unity as 'an Indian dream':

> Whether there was such a thing as an Indian dream through the ages, vivid and full of life or sometimes reduced to the murmurings of troubled sleep, I

> do not know. Every people and every nation has some such belief or myth of national destiny and perhaps it is partly true in each case.
>
> (Nehru 1946: 42)

The idea of a national myth, as it is evoked by Rushdie at the moment in which India is born in the novel, is viewed as a necessary process in the construction of a nation. Rushdie's idea of a national myth has less in common with Barthes's idea of myth than with its opposite, revolutionary language or 'political speech'. Revolutionary language *makes* the world; 'it is because it generates speech which is fully, that is to say initially and finally, political, and not, like myth, speech which is initially political and finally natural, that Revolution excludes myth' (Barthes 1973: 159). The myth of India as a nation is necessary as a discourse that wishes to transform reality, that has a *transitive* meaning, i.e. there is no alienation between political actors and the object of transformation, namely the 'nation'. In *Midnight's Children*, Nehru's dream of India appeared – initially at least – very powerful in its imaginative thrust. Gradually, however, myth in this transformational sense gave way to a more absolute 'mythical' (in Barthes's sense) discourse of the nation, characterized by an increasingly monolithic and authoritarian identification between nation and state during the reign of the Widow. However, for Pakistan, as Rushdie sees it, the situation was different even in the moment of its inception; religion was the glue of Pakistan, a myth that never worked out, not even in the beginning. Right from the start, there was a sense of alienation between political actor and the 'nation'.

Nehru's conclusions about his discovery of India are characterized by a scepticism veined by a hope for the future:

> The discovery of India – what have I discovered? It was presumptuous of me to imagine that I could unveil her and find out what she is today and what she was in the long past. Today she is 400 million separate individual men and women, each differing from the other, each living in a private universe of thought and feeling. If this is so in the present, how much more difficult it is to grasp that multitudinous past of innumerable successions of human beings. Yet something has bound them together and binds them still. India is a geographical and economic entity, a cultural unity amidst diversity, a bundle of contradictions held together by strong but invisible threads.
>
> (Nehru 1946: 578)

Nehru's doubt as to whether, as a writer, he has been able to encompass all of India's teeming multitudes in his work, becomes a structural characteristic of the narrative voice in *Midnight's Children*. Indeed, the mythologizing drive of Nehru, who attempts to lend a naturalistic unity to that 'multitudinous past of innumerable successions of human beings', is redeployed as a trope for allegorizing the multifariousness and uncontainability of India. Witness the novel's last words:

> Yes, they will trample me underfoot, the numbers marching one two three, four hundred million five hundred six, reducing me to specks of voiceless dust … it is the privilege and curse of midnight's children to be both masters and victims of their times, to forsake privacy and to be sucked into the annihilating whirlpool of the multitudes, and to be unable to live or die in peace.
>
> (Rushdie 1981: 463)

The trope of uncontainability reappears towards the end of *The Great Indian Novel*: 'for every tale I have told you, every perception I have conveyed, there are a hundred equally valid alternatives I have omitted and of which you are unaware' (Tharoor 1989: 373). *The Great Indian Novel* points out how discourse and metaphor serve to somehow map, if not contain, perceptions of a land with such complex crises, because 'if we were to try and find our ethics empirically, Ganapathi, we would forever be trapped by the limitations of experience' (Tharoor 1989: 373). The uncontainability of Rushdie's, Nehru's and Tharoor's textual worlds is self-consciously woven into the endings of their books, almost as if to negate them. In the next chapter, we will see how realism tends to shape the representation of the historical event in such a way as to 'place' it in a teleological configuration of Indian national history.

6 The historical event in the postcolonial Indian novel – II

In clear contrast to *Midnight's Children*'s and *The Great Indian Novel*'s allegory of history, *A Suitable Boy* and *A Fine Balance* choose a different literary genre for their story, namely realism. It is an 'imitation' of a foundationalist history, written from a secular nationalist perspective. Indeed it seems to correspond to a 'metaphysical' idea of history that places historical events such as the Zamindari Abolition Act and the first general elections within a teleological succession. One could say that the history in *A Suitable Boy* and *A Fine Balance* is more symbolic, where events and the mode in which they are recounted are not separated within the representation. The symbol is transubstantial, in that it *is*, actually, what it represents – a naturalized metaphor. However, the differing politics of form of Rushdie and Seth do not necessarily mean that postmodern narrative or magical realism is per se more politically 'resistant' than realism, because Mistry uses realism with a more radical social agenda than Seth. Seth's writing proposes a perhaps less overtly subversive critique of the Indian nation-state, but not for that matter less powerful or less analytically penetrating. Both Seth and Mistry have brilliantly rejuvenated the classic form of the realist historical novel. The following discussion will focus on their use of realism in representing the historical event within the novel, first with reference to the 'riot', and second, to the land reform act of the early 1950s that took place at state level throughout India.

In *Event, Metaphor, Memory* Shahid Amin explores the different ways a certain event was reconfigured within nationalist histories of India and local memories, over a period of seventy years. Amin is particularly interested in deconstructing certain aspects of the 'master saga' of Indian nationalist struggles, which, according to him, are built around the retelling of certain well-known and memorable events. The significance of nationalist narratives lies in their elaborate and heroic setting down, or 'figurating', the triumph of good over evil: 'The story of Indian nationalism, for instance, is written up as a massive undoing of Colonial Wrongs by a non-violent and disciplined people' (Amin 1995: 2). His account addresses the event known as 'Chauri Chaura', where a group of nationalists – many of them peasants – attacked and set fire to a police station, killing twenty-three policemen. For Gandhi, it was an act of 'nationalist indiscipline', and the nationalist movement generally repudiated the men who were responsible for the attack. Nationalist narratives tended to marginalize such episodes, in order

to distinguish authentic popular protest from 'crime'. Amin shows how, in the episode of Chauri Chaura, the historical significance attached to an event makes the facts of the case cease to matter:

> Forever a lesson to be learnt, the 'riot' could no longer be accorded a narrative past. It could, at most, refer to past imperfection; in the Congress as an organization, in the nationalist public more generally.
>
> (Amin 1995: 46)

The use of the term 'riot' as applied to events such as these is present in Seth as well. There are several instances of popular insurgency in the book, and each is seen from the point of view of the middle class. Nationalist historians had defined subaltern rebellions as spontaneous, lacking in political consciousness, and without a clearly identifiable leadership. The Subaltern Studies historians suggested reading these counter-insurgency texts against the grain. The antagonism between the peasant rebels and the colonial authorities who were charged with containing them was clearly present in the discourse which the colonial administrators used to characterize the peasants: 'The antagonism is indeed so complete and so firmly structured that from the terms stated for one it should be possible, by reversing their values, to derive the implicit terms of the other' (Guha 1983: 16).

In Seth, there is a certain degree of ambivalence in the way the riots are narrated. The section dealing with the riots starts off in the following manner: 'Some riots are caused, some bring themselves into being' (Seth 1993: 245). From the way he describes the two riots, they are clearly of the type that 'bring themselves into being'. The spontaneous aspect of both tumults is emphasized in the narration. The first one has as its protagonists members of the jatav caste, who are shoemakers on strike. One night, a drunken brawl between some jatavs and the assistant of a trader – the people the shoemakers are striking against – 'becomes' a mob, devoid of humanity, let alone political consciousness. The other riot described is communal in origin. A group of Muslims, inflamed by the sermon of the local Imam in the mosque, decide to storm the construction site of a nearby Hindu temple. Again, the organic, irrational element in crowd-forming is underscored: 'No one knew how the men who were gathering in the narrow alleys of the Muslim neighborhood that lay on one side of Chowk became a mob' (Seth 1993: 251). The members of the crowd seem to be motivated by blind rage and are depicted as animal-like in their behaviour:

> A couple of the more eager members of the [Mosque] Committee made a few crowd-rousing remarks, a few local hotheads and toughs stirred themselves and those around them into a state of rage, the crowd increased in size as the alleys joined into larger alleys, its density and speed and sense of indistinct determination increased, and it was no longer a collection but a thing – wounded and enraged, and wanting nothing less than to wound and enrage.
>
> (Seth 1993: 251)

The people are no longer a 'they' but an 'it', one which must be stopped at all costs. The officer in charge, Krishan Dayal, is at a loss, however – 'despite his training in the army he had not learned to think tactically in a terrain of urban lawlessness' (Seth 1993: 252–3). Of course, what defines lawlessness is a point of view in the case of riots. Violence is often the only way certain groups, or interests, can make themselves heard; the use of the term 'lawlessness' in counter-insurgency texts can often be read as the defiance by the people of what they had come to regard as bad laws (Guha 1983: 17). Here the narrator evokes the communalist spectre, and the forces of law and order, that are enjoined to defend secularism, must quell this mob which seems to be prey to a religious frenzy: 'There were cries of "Allah-u-Akbar" which could be heard all the way to the police station.' Secularism is shown to have been assimilated as a creed by the policemen, whose head constable, ironically, is a Muslim. And yet it is the head constable who urges Dayal, his superior, to charge and fire on the crowd in order to make them think that the policemen are much more numerous than they actually are. The ruse works: 'The wild and dangerous mob, hundreds strong, faced with this sudden terror, halted, staggered, turned and fled. It was uncanny. Within thirty seconds it had melted away' (Seth 1993: 254). The crowd suddenly does not exist, leaving only some bodies behind. Uncannily, Seth's image echoes the representation of a riot in Ghosh's novel *The Shadow Lines*, in which the character May describes to the narrator how his cousin Tridib was killed many years earlier in Dhaka, trying to save an old man being attacked by a Muslim mob.

> Tridib ran into the mob, and fell upon their backs. He was trying to push his way through to the old man, I think. Then the mob dragged him in. He vanished. I could only see their backs. It took less than a moment. Then the men began to scatter. I picked myself up and began to run towards them. The men had melted away, into the gullies. When I got there, I saw three bodies. They were all dead. They'd cut Khalil's stomach open. The old man's head had been hacked off. And they'd cut Tridib's throat, ear to ear.
>
> (Ghosh 1988: 250–1)

As in Seth's passage, we note how the 'mob' is not individualized, and is portrayed as a murderous, anonymous entity. The irrationality of its violence is vividly evoked by the mutilated bodies they leave behind. More than once, Ghosh evokes mob violence as a terrifying, alien force, whose cries reflect 'the authentic sound of chaos' (Ghosh 1988: 201). In another 'riot' episode, the mob is seen by the narrator as animal-like, as in Seth: 'As I watched, one limb of the mob broke away from the main body and snaked out towards us' (Ghosh 1988: 203). The narrator of *The Shadow Lines* considers this fear of the communal mob to be unique to the subcontinent. In this sense, then, writing about the riot in South Asia needs to take on board Foucault's concept of the 'universal singularity' of the event, because it is 'without analogy' and yet at the same time a defining characteristic of the South Asian political landscape:

> That particular fear has a texture you can never forget nor describe… . It is without analogy, for it is not comparable to the fear of nature … nor to the fear of the violence of the state, which is the commonest of common fears. It is a fear that comes of the knowledge that normalcy is utterly contingent, that the spaces that surround one, the streets that one inhabits, can become, suddenly and without warning, as hostile as a desert in a flash flood. It is this that sets apart the thousand million people who inhabit the subcontinent from the rest of the world … it is the special quality of loneliness that grows out of the fear of the war between oneself and one's image in the mirror.
>
> (Ghosh 1988: 204)

And yet, the alleged 'spontaneity' of the riot is always left in doubt. In the case of the communal riot in *A Suitable Boy*, the problem stems from the fact that the Muslim mosque was built on the ruins of a Hindu temple. Hence, as Seth notes several pages before the narration of the event, 'Late Mughal and British records attest to a series of Hindu–Muslim riots around this spot' (Seth 1993: 211). At the time in which the story is being told, the villainous and bestial Raja of Marh has decided to build a Hindu temple in the vicinity of the mosque. On the Friday of the riot, the Imam delivers an impassioned sermon, in which he condemns the acts of these 'infidels'. In mentioning the Hindus, he uses terms such as 'ignorance and sin', 'beastliness'; their temples are 'dens of filth'. And the holy men – the sadhus – are defined as 'naked ash-smeared savages'. His terminology resembles the characterization of the Muslim mob as it is about to attack the Hindu temple, but with one difference. Although presented to the reader through the invisible filtering device of free indirect discourse, a technique Seth uses consistently throughout the novel, the Imam's voice is rather distanced from the point of view of the narrator; his speech, clearly aimed at inciting communal frenzy, is objectified in such a way as to 'make' it sound communal. A clear hierarchy between secular, communal and class discourses is constructed in this section. The narrator's position, in this section, is most sympathetic to the harried IAS officer, who is 'forced' to shoot on an unarmed crowd because he is undermanned. The officer represents the forces of secularism and reason; the shooting is portrayed as necessary to counteract 'urban lawlessness'.

Another example of the novel's 'neutral' stance is the account of a religious riot between Hindus and Shia Muslims, occasioned by the coincidence of two religious days. Communal conflict threatens to erupt over differing interpretations of the Ramayana that is to be staged as a religious play, the Ramlila: the version of Tulsidas favoured by the upper-caste Hindus, versus the version by Valmiki favoured by the lower castes. Again, the point of view which is privileged in the text is that of a middle-class character, Kedarnath Tandon. He is said to be sympathetic to the cause of the jatavs, but he feels that including lower caste actors in the representing of the Ramayana is 'a political invasion of religion', and can only lead to artistic disaster. Jagat Ram, the jatav who acts as the spokesman for the community, is one of the few members of the subaltern class represented in the novel. Significantly, he is no revolutionary. He knows that even Gandhi

thought that people should continue in their hereditarily ordained professions: 'this was what most Hindus believed, and if beliefs and laws were changing, a few more generations would continue to be crushed under the wheels of the great chariot before it finally ground to a blood-stained halt' (Seth 1993: 1132). As in the case of the Zamindari Act, Seth has a progressivist and gradualistic approach to social change: no sudden revolution here, but rather a pragmatic appraisal of the dynamics of social transformations.

The staging of the Ramlila superimposes a sacred geography upon the city of Brahmpur. A small square near the temple in Misri Mandi, the heart of the old city, perilously close to the Muslim area, 'becomes' Rama's capital of Ayodhya. The festival of Dussehra occurs at the same time as the recurrence of Moharram, when Shia martyrs are mourned and Muslims walk in procession to display replicas of the martyrs' tombs in the Imambara. The task of the secular government is to ensure that these two conflicting sacred spaces mapped out by the two processions do not intersect at any point. Communal violence is shown to occur when two different religious calendars collide, when a period of mourning is abruptly interrupted by manifestations of joy. The moment at which violence breaks out in the text has been prepared by two sequential sections in which we are immersed completely first in the worldview of the Shia Muslim believer, and then in that of the Hindu.

> Both sides were now filled with the lust to kill – what did it matter if they too suffered martyrdom? – to attack pure evil, to defend what was dear to them – what did it matter if they died? – whether to recreate the passion of Karbala or to re-establish Ram Rajya and rid the world of the murderous, cow-slaughtering, God-defiling devils.
>
> (Seth 1993: 1152)

The novel incorporates both of these sacred conceptions of time into its secular time scheme, characterized by simultaneity of action. Secular, historical time is distinguished by its tolerant incorporation of both Hindu and Muslim ahistorical temporal conceptions. The third-person narrator who views the scene from the outside, represents it as a simultaneous whole, rather than fragmented into separate Hindu and Muslim identities which cannot be subsumed within a secular idea of Indian citizenship. Again, the narrative discourse objectifies and isolates communal speech in the novel, clearly distinguishing it from the authorial speech.

In Mistry's *A Fine Balance*, another example of a realist text, communal discourses in the novel are ordered in a different way from how they are in *A Suitable Boy*. The policemen are shown as intolerant, caste-ridden and utterly contemptuous of the underclass. The poor, on the other hand, appear as the representatives of a secular perspective. The two tailors Ishvar and Om belong to a caste formerly known as 'untouchable', and still considered as such in their home village. When Ishvar and Om's immediate family are all burnt to death in a horrific case of upper-caste violence, they go to the police station to file a complaint, known as a First Information Report (FIR). They are accompanied

by their friend Ashraf, a Muslim, with whom they have bonded partly because of their common marginalized position in society. But the police offer no help whatsoever, in fact they threaten Ishvar and Om: 'You filthy achhoot castes are always out to make trouble! Get out before we charge you with public mischief!' (Mistry 1996: 148). When Ashraf tries to intervene, he is told by the policeman that 'this matter doesn't concern your community. We don't interfere when you Muslims and your mullahs discuss problems in your community, do we?' (Mistry 1996: 148). The narrative perspective here also embodies a secular position, as in Seth, except that it assigns this reasonable, humane viewpoint to the tailors rather than to the policeman. Muslims and Hindus on the lower social scale are portrayed as having formed alliances that those in authority deride, revealing very clearly their own class prejudices, coupled with a profoundly communal outlook. Realism and authorial identification with the narrative voices are used by Mistry to describe, and hence condemn, the corruptness and ignorance of those in power; Seth's more utopian developmental narrative, set in the idealistic 1950s, is in direct contrast with the disillusioned tragic overtones of Mistry's tale of life under the National Emergency of 1975.

In *A Fine Balance*, we also have an example of a riot 'in reverse', namely a representation of how the abrupt intervention of the police destroys order and harmony among citizens by arbitrary and cruel decisions. The tailors Om and Ishvar are off to get Om married in his home village, but they never arrive. As they are chatting in the market square with their old friend Ashraf, the police begin rounding up people into garbage trucks, apparently for no reason whatsoever. The market stalls and stands are overturned, and boxes are smashed; 'In seconds the square was littered with tomatoes, onions, earthen pots, flour, spinach, coriander, chillies – patches of orange and white and green, dissolving in chaos out of their neat rows' (Mistry 1996: 529). The chaos of the scene is further emphasized in the people's minds by the apparent senselessness of the police actions. At first, Ishvar thinks that the police are looking for criminals, but he is wrong:

> But the police were snatching people at random. Old men, young boys, housewives with children were being dragged into the trucks. A few managed to escape; most were trapped like chickens in a coop, unable to do anything except wait to be collected by the law enforcers.
>
> (Mistry 1996: 530)

The police are collecting people to be forcibly sterilized, through nefarious 'Family Planning Clinics' that under the Emergency enlisted the use of the police to perform vasectomies on unwilling people, usually from the poorer sections of society. The power of the state is thus shown to be solidly founded on a 'sanctioned violence' that is turned into the law. Its disruptive force is highlighted by the image of the orderly rows of goods dissolving into chaos; civil society and civil life are not upheld by the state, but rather try to function in spite of it.

In *A Suitable Boy*, the representation of communal discourse – of religious heteroglossia – is most explicitly portrayed in the State Legislative Assembly.

Here, within the democratic confines of a State parliament, the different religious discourses that combine to form the character of the Indian nation are given free play, represented by the various political parties. The importance of the Legislative Assembly debates in the novel shows them to be a key site for the construction of the Indian nation, where often violently clashing opinions are aired, in 'different' languages such as Urdu and Hindi. The rendering of these different languages into the English of the narrative serves to amalgamate the differing religious voices within a unifying narrative voice. 'Riots' also receive different codifications according to the religious or political discourse they are appropriated by.

Seth's narrative supports the idea that democratic institutions are the privileged site for the negotiation of political and national identity, while at the same time implicitly endorsing Nehru's progressivist and secularizing view of the Indian state. The endorsement of Nehru's democratic legacy also emerges in Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel*, whose narrator finds that for all Nehru's sins and limitations he never betrayed his belief in parliamentary democracy. 'Even though – or perhaps because – he let no one else come near to being Prime Minister, he constantly reaffirmed and encouraged the institution of parliamentary democracy in the country' (Tharoor 1989: 370).

A Suitable Boy shows that caste and religion structure Indian politics in fundamental ways. However Seth indicates that the secularization of the political sphere is still incomplete. That secularization didn't triumph completely may have been due to the fact that India, being a democracy, could not 'impose' a secular ideology on its citizens.

Historical events in *A Suitable Boy*: the Zamindari Abolition Act

Nehru's idealistic and secular vision of the future nation dominated the political climate in 1950s India. In order for the novel to exemplify this faith in a secular future for India, it had to be set during Nehru's time, and not in the 1990s, when Hindutva is on the rise in the Indian public sphere. In a sense, then, Seth's novel recuperates Nehruvianism for the 1990s, since it expresses an enduring faith in the secularism of India's political institutions such as the Legislative Assembly and the courtrooms. The representation of a communal conflict in Brahmpur is seen from the democratic and secular perspective of Nehru's letters and speeches of the early 1950s, in which he constantly lays emphasis on the importance of communal harmony. The Congress was divided on the treatment of the minorities, and the threat of a war with Pakistan raised fears of civil war in India. The narrator's own ideological and stylistic approach often echoes Nehru's oratory on the communal issue, such as this passage:

> India is a secular state. That is the very basis of our Constitution and we must understand it with all its implications. That, of course, is the only *modern* and *civilized* approach. That approach is in keeping with the whole growth of our national movement. It is not only in consonance with our ideology but with

> practical considerations. Any other approach would be fraught with disaster and would be a negation of all that we have stood for.
>
> (Nehru in Zaidi 1981: 155: emphasis added)

Nehru's secularism was largely informed by his ideal of progress. For him, the resistance of Congress members to the passing of the Hindu Code Bill was a 'symbol of the conflict between reactionary and progressive forces in the social domain' (Nehru in Zaidi 1981: 35). This form of progressive secularism is seen to be the sole viable solution for the establishment of an Indian democracy.

Nehru's organicist and teleological conception of the Indian nation also influences Seth's depiction of the Zamindari Abolition Act in *A Suitable Boy*. For Nehru, Congress stood not only for nationalism, but also 'to a large extent' for proletarian urges for social change, as he explains in *The Discovery of India*:

> In particular, it stood for revolutionary agrarian changes … Within the Congress, socialists and communists found a place and could influence Congress policy. The communal organizations, whether Hindu or Moslem, were closely associated with the feudal and conservative elements and were opposed to any revolutionary social change. The real conflict, therefore, had nothing to do with religion, though religion often masked the issue, but was essentially between those who stood for a nationalist – democratic – socially revolutionary policy and those who were concerned with preserving the relics of the feudal régime.
>
> (Nehru 1946: 399)

Nehru repeatedly uses the word 'feudalism' to describe the landlord class, thus pointing to the underlying structure of his idea of national progress, which is that of a classic developmental narrative. 'India's growth arrested', in *The Discovery of India*, is an exposition of Nehru's organic developmental theory of nations: 'A society, if it is to be both stable and progressive, must have a certain more or less fixed foundation of principles as well as a dynamic outlook' (Nehru 1946: 518). Both *A Suitable Boy* and *The Discovery of India* adopt the schema of the transition narrative in their configuration of Indian historical events.

In the novel, the Zamindari Abolition Act is portrayed as the cause of one of the most important social and economic transformations of post-Independence India, and indeed was one of the most prominent achievements of the Nehru legislation. In the narrative it symbolizes the passage from feudalism to the rise of the middle class, traditionally seen as a crucial moment of transition in the development of a modern industrialized state.

Further on, we are treated to a debate in the State's house of representatives on the passing of the legislation concerning the Zamindari Abolition Act. This is obviously a fictional debate, and yet closely modelled on similar debates that took place around that time. As part of the author's underlying democratic discourse, Seth aims to give us as wide a picture as possible, hence the reader's understanding of the problem is developed through the portrayal of the dissenting political and

interest groups represented in the State parliament, namely the feudal landlords and the socialists. The voicing of these two extremist positions, the degree of persuasiveness of each argument, is rendered in order to show how the passing of this bill is a product of democracy, and not of a totalitarian regime. Seth, in his portrayal of the Zamindari Act, shows how difficult it was to effect a major land reform like this one through a democratic regime and with a constitution that guaranteed 'equality before the law or the equal protection of the laws within the territory of India' (*Constitution of India* 2000: 15). This was the content of Article 14 of the Indian Constitution, which was used by lawyers to make their case for the dispossessed zamindars against the state, as Seth's account shows.

The narrator attempts to give us as complete a picture as possible of the effects of the Act. Seth's portrayal aims to convince us that it brought on a major societal change, through democracy and not through communism. Seth's historical judgement on the importance of the Act coincides significantly with that of Nehru. In the report the Prime Minister submitted to the All-India Congress Committee in July 1951 (roughly contemporaneous to the events portrayed in the book), Nehru states:

> From a social point of view, the biggest achievement has been the legislation in many states for the abolition of the zamindari system. Unfortunately, this was held up by an interpretation of the Constitution in the courts and it became necessary to amend the Constitution to get over these difficulties.
>
> (Nehru 1951 in Zaidi 1981: 151)

Seth presents a more historically informed view of the Act than Nehru does, from the perspective of forty years later. The Act substantially preserved 'the great inequalities of the social order'. Precisely because India was a democracy, a complete and revolutionary land reform was not possible.[1] The electoral base of the Congress Party was the medium and small landowners, who stood to lose most from the implementation of the Act. The problem was, as one character puts it, that 'land revenue isn't a central subject – it's a state subject'. It was in the hands of the provincial legislatures, which were ultimately unable or unwilling to operate freely.

Seth's positive judgement on the Zamindari Act ultimately rests on its being an agent of gradual social change. He communicates this to us by the progressive endorsement of this point of view from many different characters with varying interests at stake, for example, the Nawab Sahib. But these different characters are all drawn from the middle class or the aristocracy – Seth's positive assessment corresponds to a view of the land reform act *from above*. The socialist MLA's position, that the Act was passed in order to prevent a peasant revolution, is quickly dismissed, and indeed the role of the peasantry in bringing about the anti-zamindari legislation is not even considered. The main architects of the Act appear to be the Minister and his assistants.[2] In this sense, Seth's fictional account seems more interested in tracing the official version of the land reform, as discussed in legislative assemblies and portrayed through the minds of characters belonging to the ruling elite.

A Fine Balance portrays the situation for landless peasants and lower castes in a rather different light, examining what their fate has been twenty years after independence. The promised reforms, that in *A Suitable Boy* mark a utopian beginning for the nation, have not materialized for those worse off, who grow tired of waiting. The so-called 'untouchable' Narayan says angrily to his father:

> 'Government passes new laws, says no more untouchability, yet everything is the same. The upper-caste bastards treat us worse than animals.'
> 'Those kinds of things take time to change.'
> 'More than twenty years have passed since independence. How much longer? I want to be able to drink from the village well, worship in the temple, walk where I like.'
>
> (Mistry 1996: 142)

Subaltern characters in *A Fine Balance* are often made the centres of consciousness – it is often through their eyes and from their perspective that scenes are portrayed. Social change is almost impossible to achieve, not even gradually; Narayan is seen by the upper castes as someone who has distorted 'society's timeless balance' by leaving his hereditary profession and becoming a tailor. For this reason he is punished with death. Mistry's engagement with social realism is reminiscent of the great radical experiments of Zola, but also of Balzac. And indeed, his novel is prefaced by a quotation from Balzac's *Le Père Goriot*, which urges the reader to remember that 'this tragedy is not a fiction. All is true' (Mistry 1996).

Certainty and uncertainty

This chapter has examined some aspects concerning the configuration of historical events in *A Fine Balance* and *A Suitable Boy*. Compared to *Midnight's Children*, there is a common secularizing component of their (hi)stories of India, while allowing for great differences in their emplotment of historical occurrences. Whereas *Midnight's Children* offers a fragmented history whose key events are often discordant with a modernizing narrative of the nation-state, informed by a genealogical sense of the past, *A Suitable Boy* privileges the account of India's gradual rise to democracy within a more celebratory narrative, and without displaying any overt uneasiness with such a historicist account of India's recent past. *A Suitable Boy* projects a certainty about the future that is not shared by the narrator of *Midnight's Children*, who cannot foresee a possible future for himself, or for India, beyond a centrifugal implosion. In *A Suitable Boy,* 'the "country" ("nation") and class unity is already given, as the ideal expression of class interests and the course of history' (Pandey 1994: 213). By contrast, *Midnight's Children*, though written several years earlier, does not yield any answers as to the direction the country will take after the end of the Emergency. This radical dystopianism would gain even more momentum in Rushdie's subsequent novels about the subcontinent, *Shame* (1983) and *The Moor's Last Sigh* (1995).

7 Languages of the nation in *Midnight's Children* and *A Suitable Boy*

In this chapter, I look at the effects arising from the interaction between English and *bhasha* (Indian vernacular) languages in these two novels. I aim to show how this interaction on the one hand sets up English as a pan-Indian language which seeks to subsume, or at the very least represent, the vernaculars, but on the other how English is nativized through the contact with the *bhashas*. Hence, while the use of English serves to objectify the representation of Indian 'national' culture for a transnational audience, in the process it also becomes anchored to the Indian context, and made to be the expressive vehicle for specifically national concerns. Rushdie's and Seth's use of English in these texts, that have by now become part of a globalized 'postcolonial' literary canon, exemplifies the discursive oscillation between the global and the vernacular which characterizes the language of Indian English literature. I aim to show how in *A Suitable Boy* and *Midnight's Children* English functions simultaneously as a semiotic system of modernity *and* as a vernacular language.

More specifically, I contend that the linguistic mixture of the two novels projects a secular and multicultural vision of the Indian nation-state, which draws on the ideals and writings of Nehru. But whereas in *Midnight's Children* the languages are juxtaposed in a deliberately accumulative and expressionistic manner, a studied babble of idiolects relatively devoid of ideological hierarchy, in *A Suitable Boy* the different languages (also in the sense of social idioms) that make up the voices of the novel are composed into a 'structured stylistic system' which reveals a more 'orderly' – one could say statist – vision of the nation.

Heteroglossia, namely the dialogic interrelation of different registers and dialects that gravitate within the orbit of a national language, is in constant tension with the tendency towards linguistic centralization and unification (Bakhtin 1981: 272–3). In India, rather than a national language, there is a national linguistic 'system', composed of a variety of different languages. Seth's and Rushdie's different use of language mixture forms an integral part of their differing representations of Indian heteroglossia, and proposes differing political solutions for India's 'present needs'. Rushdie's 'Super-Sexy-High-Masala-Art' is an expression of the rebelliousness of the democratic forces rising up against the authoritarianism of the Emergency. *Midnight's Children* celebrates the fragmentation of the polity because it signifies the pluralism of democracy as opposed to the dictatorial discourse of Indira Gandhi's

regime. Saleem represents within his often unwieldy first-person narrative many voices, many languages, many characters, struggling to contain them all until the end of the story, when he foresees his imminent disintegration into 600 million separate identities, the population of India. But this fragmentation is celebrated as a positive value for the polity, because it reaffirms the pluralism which is a vital component of democracy, a form of government which Rushdie strongly endorses. Thus heteroglossia in *Midnight's Children* often appears Joycean, excessive, over the top; in *Midnight's Children* are all the voices that the Emergency is trying to silence.

Seth, on the other hand, is writing in a very different political climate from the Emergency. *A Suitable Boy* is a Nehruvian epic, but in a very different sense from *Midnight's Children*. Seth's realistic, ordered narrative, which sets firm boundaries for bourgeois desire, presents a wonderfully orchestrated cast of characters whose voices are always contained within the unobtrusive presence of the third-person omniscient narrator. The realism of Seth's style is underscored by a developmental and statist idea of the nation-state. The novel endorses Nehruvian secularism as the only politically viable solution for a potentially centrifugal polity which is being increasingly undermined by Hindu right-wing politics. Minorities such as Muslims and lower castes were directly threatened with exclusion from the Indian body politic. Seth's organic portrayal of an India whose minorities are a vital part of its identity and his endorsement of a strong state secularism seeks to write against the fragmentation of the polity. He reworks the multilingual reality of modern India into a monologic form, from the secular perspective of an omniscient third-person narrator.

The way in which language mixture is used in the two novels ties in to the question of whether English can be seen as a pan-Indian, secular language in the Indian linguistic context, and how this status defines it in relation to vernacularization and globalization. Rushdie and Seth partly draw from this already established notion of English as a pan-Indian secular language in order to create secularist and pluralist representations of India that are, however, very different from each other, as can be observed in a series of close readings from the two texts. Both novels present code-switching and code-mixing from other *bhashas*, though these processes are more frequently apparent in Rushdie than in Seth. English also functions as a language of 'translation' from other Indian languages. In *Midnight's Children*, the other language of interaction is Urdu, in *A Suitable Boy* it is Hindi, Urdu, Bengali and a 'rustic dialect' spoken in the village of Debaria. G.J.V. Prasad has perceptively outlined the analogy between Indian English texts and translations: Indian English writers are not so much translating texts from vernacular languages into English as using various strategies to make their works read like translations (Prasad 1999).

Indian English writing has been defined as a contact literature, which grows out of close proximity to Indian languages while immersed in an Indian context (Kachru 1983: 44). The artistic potential of contact literature can be best understood not as a closed linguistic system (à la Saussure), but as a relational system of languages in contact and 'mutual recognition with each other' (Bakhtin 1981: 295).

The transformation of English in an Indian context is well exemplified in the code-mixed Indian English Rushdie adopts for his characters' speech, such as the narrator's uncle Hanif who is speaking here:

> He wallops me in the back, toppling me forwards into Mary's arms. 'Hey little wrestler! You look fine!' 'But so thin, Jesus! They haven't been feeding you properly? You want cornflour pudding? Banana mashed with milk? Did they give you chips?' … And Hanif booms, 'Yes, tickety-boo! The boy is really ship-shape! Come on phaelwan: a ride in my Packard, okay?' And talking at the same time is Mary Pereira, 'Chocolate cake,' she is promising, 'laddoos, pista-ki-lauz, meat samosas, kulfi. So thin you got, baba, the wind will blow you away.' … 'Your Pia aunty is waiting! My god, you see if we don't have a number one good time!'
>
> (Rushdie 1981: 239)

The syntactic and lexical exchanges that occur between English and the other Indian languages create an English with a much larger scope of expression than the Anglo-American standard, also owing to the new meanings arising from the Indian context, which this Indian English is brought to encompass. The language of Seth and Rushdie draws on more than one linguistic basis, though the way in which the *bhashas* are represented within the novels presents two very different conceptions of Indian English, one tending towards a linguistic unity of expression (*A Suitable Boy*) and one emphasizing its heteroglossia (*Midnight's Children*).

Indeed, Seth's novel has a very wide range of heterogeneous narrative material, and yet the narrator arranges an ideological hierarchy of all the different languages of the novel in such a way as to privilege a monological tone. The use of *bhasha* words in the text does not enter into a carnivalesque collision with the English. However, Seth Indianizes the English in more subtle ways, which are not as immediately apparent as Rushdie's pyrotechnic linguistic experimentalism. An example is the ridiculous but highly comic dissonance created by Seth's spoof on nationalist Indian poetry of the worst kind. In *A Suitable Boy*, Dr Makhijani, an 'eminent' poet from the University of Brahmpur, is shown to be reciting his 'Hymn to Mother India' to a captive audience (Seth 1993: 163–4):

> How to describe bondage of Mother pure
> By pervert punies chained through shackles of law?
> British cut-throat, Indian smiling and slave:
> Such shame will not dispense till a sweating grave.
>
> While reading the above stanza, Dr Makhijani became highly agitated, but he was restored to equanimity by the next one:
>
> Let me recall history of heroes proud,
> Mother-milk fed their breasts, who did not bow.

> Fought they fiercely, carrying worlds of weight,
> Establishing firm foundation of Indian state.

In both texts, but especially in Seth, it is interesting to distinguish between intentional spoofs of Indian English – a rendering of language use by Indian speakers to *comic* effect – and an effective 'recreation' of Indian English as a spoken variant of Standard English.

The idea of hybridizing English in order to fashion it as a pan-Indian literary language took the form of a programmatic nationalist statement in Raja Rao's preface to his novel *Kanthapura* (1938):

> We are all instinctively bilingual, many of us writing in our own language and in English. We cannot write like the English. We should not. We cannot write only as Indians. We have grown to look at the large world as part of us. Our method of expression therefore has to be a dialect which will some day prove to be as distinctive and colourful as the Irish or the American. Time alone will justify it.
>
> (Rao 1938: p. v)

Kanthapura appears interesting for 'the manner in which the experimental use of the English language is geared towards the definition of a cultural identity' (Sethi 1999: 40–1). Rao's manifesto established hybridity and language mixture, and most importantly, bilingualism, as key features of Indian English as a literary language. A defining characteristic of English as it was used to narrate an Indian context had always been linguistic experimentation and innovation. For Rushdie, his restructuring of the English sentence in *Midnight's Children* is not only postmodernist, it is also a way of letting Indian speech patterns into the English:

> *Midnight's Children* was partially conceived as an opportunity to break away from the manner in which India had been written about in English, not just by Indian writers but by Western writers as well.
>
> (Rushdie 1984: 19)

Language emerges as one of the key concerns for Rushdie in writing *Midnight's Children*. He acknowledges the important influence G.V. Desani's novel *All About H. Hatterr* had on his language, and how it served as a linguistic model for transforming his English:

> The way in which the English language is used in that book is very striking; it showed me that it was possible to break up the language and put it back together in a different way … one thing it showed me was the importance of punctuating badly. In order to allow different kinds of speech rhythms or different kinds of linguistic rhythms to occur in the book, I found I had to punctuate it in a very peculiar way, to destroy the natural rhythms of the

> English language; I had to use dashes too much, keep exclaiming, putting in three dots, sometimes three dots followed by semi-colons followed by three dashes … That sort of thing just seemed to help to dislocate the English and let other things into it.
>
> (Rushdie 1984: 19–20)

The rhythm of Desani's language in *All About H. Hatterr* is similar to Rushdie's: the ironic, playful rhetorical tone, filled with redundant adjectives and attributes. Rushdie's vernacularization of English serves to assimilate it into an Indian context, to make it into an Indian language. This vernacularization of English is at work in Seth as well, though in a less visible manner. Making English into an Indian language is essential for lending verisimilitude to Seth's and Rushdie's narratives of India. An important part of their achievement as novelists is showing to what extent English can be made into an expressive medium for chronicling contemporary India. The question is: why does the transformation of language in the direction of vernacularization appear so necessary to both writers for the novels they are writing about India?

English came to be identified with modernity and nation-building after Indian Independence. Contrary to the received opinion that English became the linguistic vehicle of modernity in the colonial period, Amit Chaudhuri claims that it was the rise of the vernacular which was the vehicle of modernity for the rising Indian middle classes. The creation of the first modern Indian literature in Bengali, for example, was directly related to the fact that Bengali had become the principal medium of expression of the educated Bengali middle classes. The vernaculars, Chaudhuri claims, 'which were, in truth, paradigms of a new consciousness – emerged from a feudal-religious world into a secular one' (Chaudhuri 2001: p. xxi).

At the time of Independence there was no agreement on what was to be the national language. The debate was divided between Hindi extremists and moderates; and both sides conceded 'the idea of having a single language being a precondition of firm, unassailable nationalism', an idea which revealed the profound influence of European nationalist precedents on the Indian intelligentsia (Kaviraj 1992b: 54). Though the Nehru government encouraged the adoption of Hindi as a national language, what *de facto* became the language of India's nation-building in the years after Independence was English. English became the language of the secular elite, and in time came to be identified with a secular subject-position. However, this may no longer be the case, with the increasing popularity of Hindutva among the Anglicized middle classes in India. The English language of *A Suitable Boy*, for example, by aspiring to a pan-Indian representativeness which transcends religious, cultural and linguistic differences, finds its truest voice in the third-person omniscient narrator who projects a 'superior' secular perspective on communal and other 'non-modern' conflicts.

English has assumed an increasingly hegemonic role in Indian public life since Independence:

> In the public sphere the elite has used English – obviously English here is more than simply a language; it is also a juridical/legal apparatus, also a political idiom, in short, a semiotic system signifying modernity, etc. – to impose its secular categories on the social world.
>
> (Dhareshwar 1993: 117–18)

Caste and religious idioms, when articulated in English, had to be approached at one remove, as it were, as an 'experience-distant concept'. In some sense, secular discourse could best be articulated through English because it acted as a 'meta-language' vis-à-vis caste and tradition. The English language of *A Suitable Boy* similarly acts as a secularizing, and occasionally homogenizing medium for the heterogeneous religious and cultural traditions which are represented within it. The novel's linguistic uniformity manages to convey a sense of representational transparency which makes it an extremely supple fictional medium, able to encompass lengthy political debates, Urdu poetry and comic dialogue without losing narrative momentum. Seth's style performs the ideological function of conveying a classically Nehruvian idea of India premised on 'unity within variety'.

In both novels, English assumes the role of a pan-Indian language – the opposite of localized – in order to provide a pan-Indian representation. The concept of translation serves as a useful metaphor for its transformation into a vernacular, national and global language at the same time. On the one hand, in fact, the narrative voices in both novels effect a 'translation' from Indian languages into English so as to represent the multilingual complexity of the Indian nation-state within an overarching (though not perhaps unifying) narrative discourse. The heteroglossia of the nation is 'translated' into a monolingual medium (though characterized to a greater or lesser extent by language mixture) aspiring to a pan-Indian representativeness. On the other hand, the narrators are vernacularizing English by presenting it as a medium of translation from other Indian languages.

In the novels, many different Indian languages circulate in the dialogues, or in the free indirect discourse of characters who do not speak English as their first language. Rushdie and Seth, in different ways, radicalize Bakhtinian heteroglossia as a model for conceiving national language, by transposing into their English the multilingual nature of the Indian nation-state, whose unity, unlike the majority of the European nations, was not conceived on the basis of a common national language (the Constitution lists eighteen official languages of the Indian Union).

The contrast between the carnivalesque proliferation of idioms in *Midnight's Children* and the more unitary prose of *A Suitable Boy* comes out in their different methods of 'translation'. What I am calling translation here is, of course, not a translation at all, in the sense that the dialogues and free indirect speeches in other Indian languages which are rendered in English, or Indian English in the text, are renditions of an 'original' which does not exist. The idea of Indian English writing as translation is based on the analogy described by Maria Tymoczko:

> The culture or tradition of a post-colonial writer acts as a metatext which is rewritten – explicitly and implicitly, as both background and foreground – in the act of literary creation. The task of the interlingual translator has much in common with the task of the post-colonial writer; where one has a text, however, the other has the metatext of culture itself.
>
> (Tymoczko 1999: 20)

Rushdie himself likens the condition of the postcolonial writer to that of a translator, in his famous definition of British Indian writers as 'translated men', who are 'borne across across the world', and act as mediators between cultures (Rushdie 1990: 17). The most significant devices by which English is Indianized in the two novels are, in varying degrees, code-mixing, hybridization and transfer of context. Transfer of context, a term coined by the linguist Braj Kachru,

> involves transfer of those cultural patterns which are absent or different in those cultures where English is used as a first language. For instance, in Indian English fiction, the following cultural patterns, which repeatedly occur in typically Indian plots, come under such transfer: the caste system, social attitudes, social and religious taboos, superstitions, notions of superiority and inferiority.
>
> (Kachru 1983: 131)

Code-switching and code-mixing occur in a situation where there is language contact, and the alternation of codes 'is determined by the function, the situation, and the participants' (Kachru 1983: 193). Code-mixing consists of the presence of Hindi–Urdu words in the dialogues and/or the narrative voice. Kachru notes how in Indian creative writing there is a long tradition of *bhasha sankar* (language mixture), especially in poetry, for various types of effects. Hybridization, a subcategory of code-mixing, entails the use of at least one item of English and one from a native language, as for example the word 'jailkhana' used by a character in *Midnight's Children*: 'Oh my God my hour has come, my darling Madam, only let me go peacefully, do not put me in the jailkhana!' (Rushdie 1981: 279).

Generally speaking, the translated dialogues of *Midnight's Children* privilege what I shall call an expressionistic rendering of the *bhashas* in such a way as to make them virtually undistinguishable from Indian English. Rushdie's language is characterized by much code-mixing, and generally aims towards a comic effect. There is a strong contrast between the dialogues, which are in Indian English, and the language of the narrator, which is in an English much closer to the British standard. The translations from Indian languages of *A Suitable Boy*, on the other hand, display what I shall call a symbolic use of the vernacular, with little or no code-mixing, in the sense that English, in some instances, becomes a *symbolic* Urdu, Hindi, Bengali, etc.

In what sense can it be said that Seth's is a symbolic translation, whereas Rushdie's is expressionistic? Here is an example of how Seth renders the ornate

Urdu speech of the Muslim courtesan and musician Saeeda Bai, who is gently reproaching her lover Maan for not visiting her:

> 'Rumour has it, Dagh Sahib, that you have been in town for some days now. Twirling, no doubt, that handsome ivory-headed cane. But the hyacinth that obtained favour yesterday appears withered today to the connoisseur.'
> 'Begum Sahiba – ' protested Maan.
> 'Even if she has withered away only for lack of the water of life,' continued Saeeda Bai …
>
> (Seth 1993: 871)

The English of this passage functions as a symbolic Urdu; in order to foreground the purity of the language, Seth chooses an elevated register of English. Code-mixing with Urdu and other linguistic hybridization does not occur in the passage, because it is not felt to be a sufficiently representative translation of the elegance of 'chaste' Urdu. The author fashions a symbolic, rather than material equivalent to the Urdu out of an elevated register of English. Rushdie's translated Urdu, on the other hand, aims to reproduce at least partly some of the syntactical structures, lexical items and tone of the source language, in order to express the earthiness of the Hindi–Urdu spoken by some of his characters. When Parvati-the-Witch, Saleem's future wife, first meets Saleem in person (previously they had only conversed telepathically), she exclaims happily:

> 'Arre' baap, Saleem, you remember – the children, yaar, O this is too good! So why are you looking so serious when I feel like to hug you to pieces? So many years I only saw you inside here,' she taps her forehead, 'and now you're here at last with a face like a fish. Hey, Saleem! Say one hullo at least.'
>
> (Rushdie 1981: 379)

This different rendering of *bhashas* in the two authors expresses different attitudes to the conception of the body politic in these two writers. It is not so much that Rushdie is allowing the vernaculars to roam unchecked within his text, while Seth is keeping them under tight control. Indeed, Rushdie often provides the translations of Hindi–Urdu words next to the original in the text (though not always). Seth, on the other hand, deliberately does not provide a glossary or translations of Hindi, Urdu or Bengali words. Even so, the images of national Indian heteroglossia that Seth and Rushdie create differ radically. Rushdie celebrates the uncontainable, almost anarchic multiplicity of voices and languages that take over the voice of the narrator, whose body politic struggles to govern them. But India continuously strains at the seams; and imposing Emergencies is of no use, the voices make themselves heard anyway. On the other hand, the orderly containment of vernaculars within a symbolic use of translation in Seth's text is a function of a much more statist idea of the nation; clearly not the statism of Indira Gandhi's Emergency, but rather the statism of Nehru. Seth's English is just as innovative and creative as Rushdie's, though it is less visibly characterized

by linguistic virtuosity. It subverts standard English in subtle ways, often turning common figures of speech into comic and suggestive images, such as the old Bengali clerk Biswas Babu's new twists to English idiomatic expressions:

> 'But you are probably making hail while the sun shines, and sowing oats. That is why I have come', [said Biswas Babu].
> 'Sowing oats?' Amit was puzzled.
> 'But Meenakshi has rolled the ball, now you must follow it.'
> It suddenly struck Amit that Biswas Babu was talking … about marriage.
> (Seth 1993: 451)

Biswas Babu's unconsciously creative reformulations of metaphor are examples of the possible metamorphoses that English undergoes in native utterance. Both Seth's privileging of symbolic representation of the vernacular and Rushdie's code-mixed and slangy Indian English are highly stylized renderings of Indian heteroglossia.

Seth's symbolic translation of Urdu has a similar function to the transfer of context, indeed in many cases cultural and linguistic translations are virtually indistinguishable. Both novels foreground the issue of the 'ethnocentric' text/translation versus the 'foreignizing' or 'ethnodeviant' text/translation. In the ethnocentric version, a translation focuses on bringing the author to the audience – translating will consist of a familiarizing process. Maria Tymoczko refers to this type of translation as 'an assimilative presentation in which likeness or "universality" is stressed and cultural differences are muted and made peripheral to the central interests of the literary work' (1999: 21). In the foreignizing or ethnodeviant approach, on the other hand, the translator deliberately foregrounds unfamiliar cultural elements or leaves some lexical items untranslated, in the effort to bring the audience towards the text, rather than the opposite:

> modes of translating the 'other' that allow 'alien' languages (and ways of life) to interrogate, even radically disrupt the language (and way of life) that the self inhabits by virtue of being embedded in it.
> (Dingwaney 1996: 7)

Whether a translation can be said to be ethnocentric or ethnodeviant is largely determined by the provenance of its audience. But what makes a novel like *A Suitable Boy* so interesting, and at the same time so difficult to 'read' analytically, is that the different Bakhtinian 'languages' of the novel produce both ethnocentric and ethnodeviant forms of English. At times, the English-speaking reader will immediately tune into the language being spoken, as in the case of the self-conscious verbal play of the Mehras and the Chatterjis, the two families who generally speak directly in English – in their case there is no 'translation' on the part of the narrator. The different varieties of English present in the novel induce a constant reflection on language, as well as the many instances where the characters themselves discuss knowledge and command of English, which in

India is a marker of social status, especially in middle-class society. Seth's subtly parodic and metalinguistic subversion of standard English provides an interesting stylistic contrast with Rushdie's form of vernacularization. The language of *Midnight's Children* allows Indian English to take centre stage, by dramatizing and highlighting each character's idiosyncratic Indianisms.

The Indian English of *Midnight's Children* displays some similar formations to that of *A Suitable Boy*, though Rushdie uses it much more frequently in his dialogues. Seth's seamless rendering of Urdu is in striking contrast with Rushdie's deliberately 'dirty', namely code-mixed, translations. These 'translations' can be called expressionistic in the sense that they are pervaded by the earthiness of street Hindi. Within the language of the narrator Saleem Sinai, English takes on a very wide spectrum of registers, from the slightly deranged linguistic idiosyncrasies of Saleem's narrative style, to translations of dialogues from Indian languages, to the slangy code-mixed Indian English used by the Anglicized middle class of 1950s Bombay. It is important to note that Rushdie's 'translations' from Hindi, Urdu and other *bhashas* come across as Indian English, as in the case of the street Hindi spoken by the artistes of the magicians' ghetto. This English 'translation' of a Hindi–Urdu original which does not exist includes deviations from native varieties of English – for example, the writer will omit the article, translate figures of speech literally, put 'only' at the end of the sentence, use the present continuous instead of the simple present (all Indianisms). The language being portrayed is rarely stated explicitly, but must be deduced from the social and geographical context.

In *Midnight's Children*, the speech of the boatman Tai contains examples of code-mixing with Urdu, which is a way to foreground the vernacular element. Here Tai, who is reputedly as old as the hills, tells Aadam of his meeting with the aged Isa (Jesus Christ) when, according to legend, he came to the Kashmir valley:

> Nakkoo, listen, listen. I have seen plenty. Yara, you should've seen that Isa when he came, beard down to his balls, bald as an egg on his head. He was old and fagged-out but he knew his manners. 'You first,' Taiji, he'd say, and 'Please to sit'; always a respectful tongue, he never called me crackpot, never called me *tu* either, always *aap*. Polite, see? And what an appetite! Such a hunger, I would catch my ears in fright. Saint or devil, I swear he could eat a whole kid in one go. I told him, eat, fill your hole, a man comes to Kashmir to enjoy life, or to end it, or both. His work was finished. He just came up here to live it up a little.
>
> (Rushdie 1981: 16)

In the above passage, we have examples of code-mixing and hybridization: 'Nakkoo' = the nosey one (from the Hindi *nak* = nose), 'yara', an exclamation; and Tai explains how Isa used the deferential form *aap* of the personal pronoun, instead of the more casual *tu*, which is used to address social inferiors. The linguistic distinction thus becomes a social one; but only a Hindi or Urdu speaker would be able to understand Tai's reference. 'Please to sit' also sounds like Indian English.

Throughout the novel, characters constantly use Hindi–Urdu words; in some cases they are translated for the non-Indian reader, in other cases they are not. Harish Trivedi claims that most of the Hindi words have an English translation, for 'instant intelligibility':

> Rushdie does not risk incomprehension and spells out the meaning of whatever little Hindi he uses. Thus, 'the Muslim muhallas' of Chandni Chowk are not left at that by him but specified to be 'the Muslim muhallas or neighborhoods' … and in the phrase 'Godown, gudam, warehouse, call it what you like', we have an embarrassment of riches, what with Indian English followed by Hindi followed by proper English.
>
> (Trivedi 1999: 79)

Trivedi's point is that Rushdie's bilingualism is superficial, and that Hindi words are scattered here and there as a badge of authenticity which is not backed by a deeper mediation between the two cultures, Western and Indian. Trivedi here relies on a traditional concept of the relationship between the two languages and cultures involved in translation. This traditional perspective assumes a source language or culture 'invariably carrying an aura of authenticity – and a target one, seen in some way as imitative'. It is more productive to think of the relationship in terms of 'guest' and 'host' languages:

> [t]he question then becomes not whether 'individualism', for example, means something different in modern Indian … culture, but how Chinese or Indian writers might translate and deploy the concept to make locally significant points. In this way, what is untraditional is not necessarily seen as Western, or as un-Indian or un-Chinese.
>
> (Orsini 2002: 82)

Moreover, apart from the irrelevance whether Rushdie's bilingualism is superficial or not – presumably, the last thing he is interested in is 'authenticity' – there is quite a large number of words left untranslated in the text. Just one example: 'a real rutputty joint, with painted boards proclaiming LOVELY LASSI and FUNTABULOUS FALOODA and BHEL-PURI BOMBAY FASHION with filmi play-back music blaring out of a cheap radio by the cash-till' (Rushdie 1981: 215).

By contrast, Trivedi's review of the Hindi translation of *A Suitable Boy* is highly complimentary. Trivedi says that, of all the recent Indian English novels, *A Suitable Boy* is the most deeply embedded in the theme and the context which it depicts, and the most intimately complicit in a local language. Trivedi finds a confirmation of this in Seth's preface to the Hindi edition of *A Suitable Boy*:

> Seth begins by saying that he is happier than he can say at the publication of this Hindi translation, for the translator has restored most of the episodes in his novel which were set in the Hindi-speaking area to 'their original

> character', reconstructed the dialogue in a language which was the one which had resonated in his own ears, and thus made his work 'stronger' in many respects.
>
> (Trivedi 1999: 31)

It is interesting that Seth here talks of the 'original character' of the Hindi dialogues, confirming the idea that in many places in the novel he is thinking of his writing as a translation from various *bhashas* into English.

The language distribution among the characters of Seth's novel aims to foreground the four languages which are elevated to the role of languages of the nation, vehicles of national culture: English, Hindi, Urdu and Bengali. They are languages of the nation in the sense that the idea of nation consists of a process of idealization and selection of historical events, religious traditions and *languages*, to construct an organic ideology which can claim a national representativeness. Not surprisingly, the characters who speak these languages all belong to the rising Indian middle class – their languages are made into cohesive and symbolic elements of national culture, while subaltern languages are relegated to the status of dialects. For example, the dialect spoken by the peasants in the fictional village of Debaria, another setting of the novel, is not considered a representative national language, and therefore is left unspecified. It appears in one of the very few dialogues left untranslated by the author:

> Whenever he needed the bus push-started he would turn and yell in the powerfully vocalic *local dialect*:
>
> 'Aré, du-char jané utari auu. Dhakka lagauu!'
>
> 'And when the bus was about to move, he would summon them with a battlecry of:
>
> 'Aai jao bhaiyya, aai jao. Chalo ho!'
>
> (Seth 1993: 700)[1]

Debaria village-speak – elsewhere described as 'rustic Hindi' – is not represented as a *national* language, but as a *local* dialect, without anchoring it to the specifics of its probable linguistic model, Bhojpuri.

The social group that dominates the language(s) of the novel is the Indian bilingual middle class, represented by four families. Each of the four families speaks one language more frequently, and a second one more occasionally, depending on the social context and the interlocutor (see the table below).

Languages spoken by the characters in *A Suitable Boy*

	Frequent	*Less frequent*
Mehras	English	Hindi
Kapoors	Hindi	English
Chatterjis	English	Bengali
Khans	Urdu	English

Mrs Rupa Mehra, for example, speaks in English with her children, but Hindi with Mrs Mahesh Kapoor. Seth uses different registers of English to represent the different languages and genres in his text. As in Rushdie, often the change is not explicitly signalled in the text, but is deduced from the type of character who is speaking, the caste and the social class to which he or she belongs, as in *Midnight's Children*. An Indian reader, unlike a Western reader, would probably recognize from contextual clues that a language shift has occurred. The two authors' representation of the Indian linguistic context is largely ethnodeviant.

A key feature of Indian English texts like *A Suitable Boy* and *Midnight's Children* is their renditions of the different Indian milieux and their specific sociolinguistics. In *A Suitable Boy*, the various languages are pulled off with varying degrees of success: the scenes in Calcutta where the Chatterji dialogues take place are much more vividly memorable than the simple referential English which renders the speeches of the Debaria villagers. The narrator's point of view is more at one with certain characters than with others. Underlying this relation of identification/distancing between the narrative voice and the characters is the concept of 'character zones' in relationship to the dialogic structure of the two novels. Character zones describe the way a character extends his or her 'sphere of influence' beyond direct discourse. Free indirect discourse is often used to show the double-voiced nature of a thought which is apparently stated by the narrator, and not directly attributed to a character, but which clearly belongs to her ideological sphere of influence. If judged by its formal markers, the logic motivating the sentences seems to belong to the author, i.e. he is formally at one with it; but in actual fact the motivation lies within the subjective belief system of the character. The diffuse use of character zones in the novel is what creates reader empathy for characters, and multiplies the number of 'languages' in the novel.

In *Midnight's Children*, on the other hand, zones are rendered through the dialogue of the characters, rather than through the fusion of authorial discourse and the speech of others, thus leading to a radically irreducible heteroglossia. We have only one point of view, that of the narrator Saleem Sinai. A consequence of Saleem's solipsism is that the characters are not as well rounded as in *A Suitable Boy*, for example, and to some extent we lack empathy for them. Since free indirect discourse is not an option for such a first-person narrator, characterization relies almost exclusively on dialogue, which is made to be as expressive of each character's individuality as possible. Thus we get a wide variety of strongly idiosyncratic idiolects, each using their own particular brand of Indian English.

In the Muslim *muhalla* in Delhi, when Saleem Sinai's birth is announced, the inhabitants speak Hindustani, rendered as a literal translation of Indian vernacular idiom. They are berating the Hindu Lifafa Das, who is showing his famous 'peepshow', a sort of magical lantern full of pictures from all over India, while crying 'Dunya dekho! See the whole world!' But communal hatred is sparked off, and from the balconies the Muslim inhabitants cry:

> 'Mother raper! Violator of our daughters!' … 'Rapist! Arre' my God they found the badmaash! There he *is*!' … 'So, mister: is it you? Mister Hindu, who defiles our daughters? Mister idolater who sleeps with his sister?'
>
> (Rushdie 1981: 76–7)

These epithets – 'Mother raper, mister idolater who sleeps with his sister' – are typically Indian curses, namely specifically vernacular speech functions translated into English. Here the English is adapted to take on communal connotations: Lifafa Das is an 'idolater', a worshipper of idols, which for Muslims is a grave blasphemy.

Unlike in *Kanthapura*, where Rao effectively creates an English based on Kannada speech-rhythms which has no basis in spoken language, in *Midnight's Children*, the dialogues often recall spoken Indian English. Saleem's childhood in Bombay, his dealings with family and friends, are all mediated through the Indian English of upper-class families living in Bombay in the 1950s. Bombay was the most Westernized of all big Indian cities, and the Sinais belong to the Anglicized business class that was emerging just after Independence. In this sense, then, the central part of the novel is not so different from the setting of *A Suitable Boy*, which also features the dialogues of middle-class Anglicized Indians like the Mehras and the Chatterjis, though these are Hindus. Saleem is brought up speaking both English and Urdu, but most of the dialogues of his Bombay period are in English. The language of this 'Bombay period' of the novel is a language recreated from memory, gleaned and reshaped from what Saleem remembers of his childhood, as he sits by his lamp 'in a pool of Anglepoised light' and tells his story. Thus, though it sounds very much like spoken Indian English, it is still a creative reimagining, rather than a faithful mimesis, of the 'original'.

If we compare Seth's and Rushdie's use of character zones, it emerges that in Rushdie they are rendered through the dialogue of the characters, rather than through the fusion of authorial discourse and the speech of others, thus leading to a radically irreducible heteroglossia. Saleem recreates the language of the streets in the Indian English that is spoken in the 'magicians' ghetto', a slum in the heart of old Delhi, where performing artists of all kinds eke out a difficult living. They speak the slangy Hindi of the streets, a bazaar language, which is rendered into a lively, ungrammatical and varied version of Indian English: '"Resham Bibi," said Parvati crossly. "You got ants on your brain?" And Picture Singh, "We got a guest, capteena – what'll he do with your shouting? Arré, be quiet, Resham, this captain is known to our Parvati personal! Don't be coming crying in front of him!"' (Rushdie 1981: 386–7). The formal deviations from British English in the language of the magicians are much more significant than in the language of other characters in the novel. Saleem's expressionistic translation, which includes grammatical mistakes, helps to emphasize their 'vernacularity', marking their distance from the more Anglicized speech patterns of the middle-class Sinais.

Language is an essential part of the nation-building process that both novels portray. *A Suitable Boy* gives great space to different technical and professional jargons which form part of the linguistic fabric necessary for the development of a

functional and democratic state. English, Hindi and Urdu emerge as the languages of the nation-building process in post-Independence India – the languages of business, law and politics.

Hindi–Urdu is the language of politics in *A Suitable Boy*, reflecting the gradual rise of the Hindi-speaking regional elites after Independence as a result of democratic politics. This elite is represented in the novel by the Kapoors, and Seth shows that the gradual ascendancy of this class had already begun in the 1950s. The sharp differences in socio-cultural terms between this regional elite and the English-educated elite such as the Mehras and the Chatterjis are marked by the language divide. The fact that so much of the novel *de facto* belongs to a Hindi–Urdu linguistic sphere – though in 'translation' – points to the contested hegemony of English as a link language in independent India (Sunder Rajan 1991: 16). Seth traces the roots of these fluctuations in linguistic popularity in the politics and society of the early 1950, which can be defined as a foundational moment for Indian nation-forming.

A Suitable Boy and *Midnight's Children* show two different aspects of the hot debates raging around language in the young nation-state under Nehru. In *A Suitable Boy*, the Legislative Assembly is the battleground of identity, and of definitions of Indian citizenship, of which language is a fundamental part. A debate in the Legislative Assembly pits Begum Abida Khan, the representative of the Muslims, against the conservative Hindu Home Minister Agarwal. At stake is the official state language of Purva Pradesh:

> L.N. Agarwal had sponsored a bill that would make Hindi the state language from the beginning of the new year, and the Muslim legislators were rising one by one to appeal to him and to the Chief Minister and to the House to protect the status of Urdu.
>
> (Seth 1993: 1104)

Begum Abida Khan takes the stance that the 'two brother languages' should be adopted together, whereas Agarwal takes the hard line that there can only be one official language, or rather one official script, Devanagari: 'Urdu is not being dispossessed, as the honourable member supposes. Anyone who learns the Devanagari script will find no difficulty in coping' (Seth 1993: 1107). Begum Abida Khan points out that the differences in the two language go beyond the different scripts that they adopt. But for Agarwal, adopting two scripts is equivalent to what in contemporary Hindutva politics is known as 'minority appeasement': 'You are asking for a two-language theory now, you will be asking for a two-nation theory tomorrow', he says to Abida Khan (Rushdie 1981: 1105). The conservative 'one-nation, one-language' position runs counter to the point the novel is making in favour of a multilingual nation (albeit narrated, or 'translated' in English for an international audience). This novel's multilingual/crypto-English position reflects the linguistic situation of post-Independence India: though the Constitution listed eighteen official languages of the Union, English *de facto* became the language of nation-building.

In *Midnight's Children*, the heteroglossia of the nation-state is not foregrounded in the democratic space of a parliamentary debate, but rather in a violent riot. In 1956–7 there were language riots in Bombay, due to the conflict between the supporters of Marathi and those advocating Gujarati. These had coalesced into two political parties, each wishing for a linguistically delimited state, and each claiming Bombay for their own. The demonstrations of the two parties are avidly observed by the young Saleem and his friends, and at one point Saleem gets pushed down among the Marathi language marchers, who mock him by asking him to speak Gujarati:

> 'Speak, little master, speak some Gujarati!' … a rhyme designed to make fun of the speech rhythms of the language:
>
> Soo ché? Saru ché!
> Danda lé ké maru ché!
>
> *How are you? – I am well! – I'll take a stick and thrash you to hell!*
>
> (Rushdie 1981: 191)

The heteroglossia of the Indian nation-state can threaten to break up territorial unity, as in the case of the language riots of Bombay. But more importantly, this episode highlights the most significant linguistic divide in modern India: that between English-speakers, almost invariably upper class, and those who don't know English. As Kachru points out, code-mixing with English is not only pan-Indian, but it is a marker of modernization, socio-economic position and membership in an elite group: 'It continues to be used in those contexts where one would like to demonstrate authority, power, and identity with the establishment' (Kachru 1983: 200). Saleem, as a member of the Anglicized middle class, does not even know Marathi, the language of the state where he lives; and for him, language marches are a mere spectator's sport. The upper class, secure in its command of English, is little concerned with the struggle of one vernacular against another for supremacy, since English is effectively the language of command. Saleem finds himself suddenly thrust in the midst of these alien struggles; and narrowly escapes with his life.

The sites and protagonists of the language issue in the two novels differ starkly: in *A Suitable Boy*, the debate does not leave the democratic confines of the Legislative Assembly, and is articulated by two members of the upper classes, the zamindari class in the case of Abida Khan and the bania (or traders') class in the case of Agarwal. In *Midnight's Children*, the riot becomes the site for the forging of national identity – heteroglossia is collisional, the young upper-class English-speaking boy haplessly running into the crowd of underclass protesters. The scenes pointedly illustrate the different aspects of the nation-forming process highlighted by Seth and Rushdie respectively: democratic dialogue, on the one hand, and violent insurgency on the other. In this respect, one can say that the different historical contexts in which the texts are to be placed explain for their different attitudes to democratic processes: in the case of Seth, democratic debate, the importance of giving space to different representative voices of the Indian

polity, is sustained as an important value at a time when the very meaning of being Indian is being hijacked by the Hindu right-wing. Rushdie, on the other hand, is writing a history of the nation from the perspective of a political situation which has seen the rejection of democracy on the part of the government: in this case, it is useless to invoke the merits of parliamentary debate, but rather the oppositional energies represented by the subaltern classes, such as the language marchers or the conjurers of the magicians' ghetto.

In the above discussion I have tried to show that the staging of linguistic heteroglossia in the two novels serves an ideological function, expressing the idea of a pluralistic, secular nation-state. However, a similarity of Nehruvian political perspectives in Seth and Rushdie yields two very different Nehruvian 'epics' of India. The irreducible heteroglossia of *Midnight's Children* emerges from the juxtaposition – or in some instances, pastiche – between the more or less literal 'translations' from *bhasha* languages, indigenized varieties of English and the stylistic idiosyncrasies of the book's master translator, Saleem Sinai. Saleem continuously stresses the unreliability of his translations, based as they are on an original stored in his memory. Yet ultimately, Saleem's abilities as a translator effect what all good translations aim at: a creative rewriting of the original. Thus the Indian English, fragmented as it is into innumerable Indian Englishes – as many as the languages spoken in India – is the linguistic counterpart of Saleem's endorsement of a pluralistic idea of the nation whose multiple voices cannot be channelled into an overarching state discourse like that of the Emergency.

In Seth's case, the translator's role is played by the third-person omniscient narrator. Thus cultural and linguistic translation privileges a transparent, rather than opaque, or 'dirty' medium. The symbolic nature of the translations from Indian languages in Seth reflects the symbolic-mimetic construction of his representation of India. His orchestration of the linguistic voices in the novels creates a well-defined hierarchy among them, an 'ordered heteroglossia'. This ordered heteroglossia reflects Seth's statist vision of the nation, the recuperation of a strong idea of India in the face of increasing political and social fragmentation.

In the language of both novels, translation plays an important role in the simultaneous vernacularization of English and globalization of the *bhashas*. Only through language mixture can the English be vernacularized and thus shaped into an Indian English, and yet only through translation can Indian languages become an integral part of a postcolonial, globalized literary English: as Rushdie says, 'it is normally supposed that something always gets lost in translation; I cling, obstinately, to the notion that something can also be gained' (Rushdie 1990: 17).

8 Cosmopolitanism and globalization in Rushdie and Seth

This chapter looks at narratives by Seth and Rushdie that do not engage specifically with the problematics and representations of the Indian nation-state in their fiction. The chapter aims to analyse the relationship, overlaps and differences between cosmopolitanism and secularism.

Cosmopolitanism has now become a favoured term by many theorists, both in liberal political philosophy and in postcolonial theory, as a concept that tends to recuperate a form of universalism based on a notion of shared belonging or shared responsibilities, commonalities and intersubjectivity. Its emergence in critical theory could be seen as an intellectual reaction to excessively restrictive notions of identity and identitarian politics. A re-engagement with Immanuel Kant's famous 'cosmopolitan' manifesto, 'To Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch', has gained much currency in recent times. Regardless of whether its reinterpretation is coming from mainstream or radical theory, there is a shared sense that cosmopolitanism is a critical notion that needs to be re-evaluated. In another context, Mary Kaldor believes that 'cosmopolitan law', i.e. 'international law that applies to individuals and not to states', is the only law that can be of use in the new situations of global violence, that she terms the 'new wars' (2002: 277). Amanda Anderson gives a definition of cosmopolitanism that highlights what she considers to be one of its most important and productive aspects – detachment: 'cosmopolitanism endorses reflective distance from one's cultural affiliations, a broad understanding of other cultures, and customs, and a belief in universal humanity' (1998: 267). However, she is careful to point out that she means a layered cosmopolitanism, that takes into account the specificities of position and location, rather than an abstract universalism. Cosmopolitanism is distinct from transnationalism. Transnationalism 'implies a process in which formations that have traditionally been perceived as restricted to well-defined political and geographical boundaries have transgressed national borders, producing new social formations' (Ali Khan 2005: 2). Transnationalism indicates a new geographical location and social condition, whereas cosmopolitanism is a consciously embraced intellectual position. In other words, cosmopolitanism always presents itself as normative, as a condition to aspire to. However, it can be said that the *need* for cosmopolitanism is premised on this new transnational condition of human beings. This is why this chapter concerns itself with the writings of Rushdie and Seth that foreground

more explicitly their positions as cosmopolitan intellectuals, in the sense that their fictions delineate a 'rootless' subject or persona in a variety of different locations and temporalities. Here the link between genre and cosmopolitanism will also be explored; to what extent are these cosmopolitan, as opposed to postcolonial narratives? What is the difference between globalization and cosmopolitanism?

In the previous chapters, some postcolonial Indian novels in English have been examined for their articulation of secularism, which, I argue, is linked to the use of the dialogic form of the novel. Moreover, the adjective 'Indian' here designates a fiction that focuses on the Indian nation-state. What this chapter seeks to do is to examine how a discussion of Nehruvianism in Seth's and Rushdie's writing has a link to a cosmopolitan sensibility in their writings *beyond* the confines of the nation-state. Rather than with the problematics of postcolonial politics, and with the complexities of forging a national ideology, Seth's and Rushdie's 'other' writing concerns itself more with delineating a cosmopolitical understanding of the self in relation to the world and the question of inter-cultural communicability. Through my analysis of these texts, I seek to understand how they tread new ground in terms of the postcolonial canon, which tends to be theorized as having as its major thematics the (decolonized) nation and the persistence of colonial discourse in postcolonial cultural formations. The focus on cosmopolitanism identifies differences, as well as overlaps, between postcolonial and 'world' literature, as well as themes more specifically dealing with diaspora, travel, multiple locations and the global city in Seth and Rushdie's writings.

In some sense, secularism as a novelistic theme in the writing of Rushdie and Seth is the more 'nation-bound' equivalent of a cosmopolitan subjectivity that emerges in their fiction, poetry and autobiography.[1] These narratives are more loosely assimilable to a *cosmopolitan* canon though, as Walter Mignolo points out, this has two different definitions. Mignolo distinguishes between narratives of cosmopolitan orientation that can either be managerial, i.e. related to the concept of globalization, or emancipatory, i.e. related to the concept of cosmopolitanism: 'globalization is a set of designs to manage the world while cosmopolitanism is a set of designs towards planetary conviviality' (2000: 721). I argue that Indian secularism can be seen as a located, indigenous form of a cosmopolitan outlook. Cosmopolitanism could be considered a non-nationally oriented version of secularism, which is understood not only as a state policy, but as a version of Indian nationhood, thus shaping concepts of both nation and state. But cosmopolitanism could also be considered an attitude towards the world, always improvisational, forging alliances and identifying possible commonalities without essentializing them. Mignolo speaks of a 'critical' and dialogical cosmopolitanism, that is grounded in a consciousness of colonial difference and premised on a regulative principle that demands 'yielding generously … toward diversity as a universal and cosmopolitan project in which everyone participates instead of "being participated"' (Mignolo 2000: 744). Rushdie's and Seth's writings can be read from two different, and yet interrelated perspectives: on the one hand, as critically cosmopolitan, projecting provisional notions of transnational solidarity, as I discuss in relation to Seth's poetry, *From*

Heaven Lake and *Two Lives*. The opposite tendency, which I identify in *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* but especially in *Fury*, tends to embrace globalization rather uncritically as enabling the mixture of disparate cultures from around the globe, disregarding the neo-colonial power differentials between them.

In relation to Rushdie, I focus on the role of the city as the traditionally privileged locus of a cosmopolitan sensibility in fiction. Inscribed in the very term 'cosmopolis' is the idea of the world as a city (and the city as a world) that transcends national or parochial allegiances; and a cosmopolitan is, etymologically speaking, a citizen of the world. As Bhabha says, 'it is to the city that the migrants, the minorities, the diasporic come to change the history of the nation' (1990: 320). He identifies it with the performative side of nation-forming, seeing the city as the space where new social movements emerge: 'It is there that, in our time, the perplexity of the living is most acutely experienced' (ibid.). The transformations of the city in Rushdie's fiction are important to his aesthetics of cosmopolitanism, and exemplify its ambivalent representation as both the site for the articulation of national secularist ideals and the centre of globalization processes. In *Fury*, New York becomes the 'non-place', and at the same time the 'everyplace' – the original and true home of the citizen of the world. Conversely, in *Midnight's Children*, *The Satanic Verses* and the *The Moor's Last Sigh*, Bombay and London, though eminently cosmopolitan cities, are differently represented from New York, because they are still viewed in their cosmopolitan *locatedness* in relation to specific national concerns, to a national emancipatory project.[2] Globalization, on the other hand, could be said to be a more 'managerial' form of cosmopolitanism, in that its cultural manifestations often come from the 'neo-imperial' metropolitan centres. In this light, *Fury*'s paean of New York as the 'super-place' is more of a globalizing than a cosmopolitan nature, as its concept of citizen of the world is premised on an Americanization of the subject. *Fury* subscribes to a fundamentally modernist notion of cosmopolitanism:

> In the modern era, which corresponded to the economic and political dominance of Western nations, cosmopolitanism by and large meant being versed in Western ways, and the vision of 'one world' culture was only a sometimes unconscious, sometimes unconscionable, euphemism for 'First World' culture.
>
> (Abbas 2000: 771)

Also Kant's cosmopolitan political project, rooted in a rationalist vision of the world, sees the Western nation as its central subject in describing its ideal of progress and conviviality or peaceful coexistence between countries. Kant draws a contrast between the 'barbarism' of the American tribes and 'civilized' nations, though he is also highly critical of the so-called 'civilized' nations' approach to war:

> The primary difference between European and American savages is that, while many of the latter tribes have been completely eaten by their enemies,

> the former know how to make better use of those they have conquered than to consume them: they increase the number of their subjects and thus also the quantity of instruments they have to wage even more extensive wars.
>
> (Kant 1983: 116)

Civilization and cosmopolitanism thus go hand in hand. For Kant, cosmopolitan right is the only way humankind can flatter itself that it is 'making continual progress towards perpetual peace' (1983: 119). He outlines the idea of the right to asylum when he claims that 'cosmopolitan right shall be limited to conditions of universal hospitality' (1983: 118). Furthermore, he condemns 'as inhospitable' the behaviour of European nations towards their American and Indian colonies.

Derrida takes up Kant's engagement with hospitality when he speaks of the ways in which European cities must become 'cities of refuge', in a bid to reorient the politics of the state towards 'the foreigner in general, the immigrant, the exiled, the deported, the stateless or the displaced person' (2004: 4). The cosmopolitan in Derrida's sense is strongly linked to a politics of hospitality that seeks to 'transform the modalities of membership by which the city belongs to the state' (ibid.). The emphasis here is on *invention*, as in the idea of 'forms of solidarity yet to be invented' (ibid.). For Derrida, 'this invention is our task; the theoretical or critical reflection it involves is indissociable from the practical initiatives we have already, out of a sense of urgency, initiated and implemented' (ibid.). The city becomes the testing-space of the laws of state sovereignty, a place where the laws on asylum need to be rethought and resisted, if necessary.

What is emphasized in Derrida's notion of hospitality, and what is erased in modernist versions of cosmopolitanism as mentioned previously, is the locatedness of the cosmopolitan in an indigenous and originally *provincial* project.[3] Any emancipatory and indeed heuristic potential linked to cosmopolitanism must be grounded in the consciousness of its own specific origins. The Bombay of *Midnight's Children* is a truly cosmopolitan Bombay, in contrast with the crypto-American 'cosmopolitan' subject of *Fury*. Cosmopolitanism, in relation to Seth's and Rushdie's texts, is admittedly a fuzzy, ambiguous category – that can be either explicitly rooted in, and emerging from the local, or eliding its provincial, situated provenance. We notice an oscillation between these two different positions in their writing. In Seth's autobiographical travel narrative *From Heaven Lake*, we encounter a cosmopolitan subject who declares his rootlessness through Bollywood songs, such as 'Awara', a wanderer. Throughout the book Seth plays the role of an 'Awara', constructing an Indian diasporic persona for himself:

> Increasingly of late, and particularly when I drink, I find my thoughts drawn into the past rather than impelled into the future. I recall drinking sherry in California and dreaming of my earlier student days in England, where I ate *dalmoth* and dreamed of Delhi. What is the purpose, I wonder, of all this restlessness? I sometimes seem to myself to wander around the world merely accumulating material for future nostalgias.
>
> (Seth 1987: 35)

There is a clear link between the cosmopolitan persona of the writer and the secularist position emerging from their novels about the Indian nation. The homesickness and nostalgia that Seth feels – nostalgia meaning an 'ache for return' in Greek – is also the enabling condition of a detachment from sectarian loyalties that marks postcolonial Indian secularism. In my discussion of the cosmopolitan strand of Seth and Rushdie's writing, I hope to uncover the complicated relationship between a secular and a cosmopolitan outlook, its overlaps, divergences, and its relationship to the nation and to narrative.

Van der Veer reminds us of the colonial origins of the cosmopolitan intellectual as a trope of secular modernity (van der Veer 2002: 166). This 'colonial cosmopolitanism', exemplified by the writing of John Stuart Mill, sees the 'end' of religion as a signifier of modernity. It is characterized by a will to transform the other into oneself, posited as the rational secular norm. The sort of globalized, 'aggressively' secular subject that emerges in Rushdie's most recent novels and essays bears a disturbing resemblance to van der Veer's colonial cosmopolitan. On the other hand, there are other types of cosmopolitanism, which are not always identifiable with secular modernity, that take on more 'spiritual' dimensions with a distinct anti-colonial flavour, such as, for example, the Theosophist movement and its role in Indian nationalism. But the cosmopolitanism of Seth and Rushdie is of the secular variety, though their dialogue with Hinduism and Islam is open, ongoing and a constant presence in their texts. In certain moments, their writings display a 'rooted' or located cosmopolitan sensibility, while at other times their writings verge on the 'globalized or managerial' variety.

Timothy Brennan has dealt most thoroughly with the negative implications of cosmopolitanism in 'Third-World' or postcolonial writers, who are seen as rootless and deracinated, treating politics as a form of postmodern play, and have gained centre stage in the postcolonial literary canon. Brennan refers principally to Rushdie's work, though a certain number of other writers are included in this bracket. He contrasts the postmodernity of cosmopolitan literary celebrities with a different idea of literary writing, whose militant credentials and potential for political resistance are guaranteed by their 'national-popular' form of addressivity. Brennan develops Gramsci's critique of cosmopolitanism as a suspect political position for intellectuals. Gramsci's main problem with Italian intellectuals of the 1920s and 1930s was its 'cosmopolitanism', an abstracted universalism disconnected from the life of the masses, and especially from the subaltern social strata who made up a large part of it. These intellectuals' concerns were seen to be 'abstract', universalist and as a class they were effectively (economically) dependent on a feudal and exploitative system, especially in the Italian South. But it would be wrong to say that Gramsci endorses a chauvinistic or nativist approach to culture, and at times Brennan runs the risk of juxtaposing cosmopolitanism with an overly prescriptive idea of writing the nation. However, while Gramsci is against cosmopolitanism as an intellectual stance, at the same time he is a resolute internationalist, establishing fertile parallels between Italian history and foreign history and culture. The *Notebooks* is in many ways an impressively cosmopolitan endeavour that testifies to Gramsci's

bewilderingly extensive knowledge of worlds very far removed from his own, such as India and the US.

Brennan's critique raises important issues in terms of reception, given the small percentage of Indians who are able to read English and who would constitute the national readership of Indian novels in English. But surely the issue of audience should not be the sole factor in determining the value of these literary texts. For Robbins, Brennan's analysis of Rushdie as a cosmopolitan author is reader- or reception-determined: 'According to Brennan, the decisive reality of the text, a social reality pinpointed with the authority of a lexicon borrowed from market research, is the "target reading publics" of Europe and North America: the "tastes" of the metropolitan consumer' (Robbins 1998: 249). But what constitutes the 'reality' of a text is not limited to its reception. Globalized distribution processes should be distinguished from the cosmopolitan stance present in Rushdie's and Seth's writing, which is, as Anderson puts it, a 'regulative ideal' rather than a textual feature that 'naturally' derives from their positioning in the world literary marketplace.

Cosmopolitanism, such as that in Seth and Rushdie's writing, is primarily articulated 'not within a philosophic or high theoretical mode, but rather within genres more classically literary or eclectic: the essay, the autobiography, travel writing, and works of literature generally' (Anderson 1999: 275). Not enough imagination, claims Robbins, 'has gone into the different modalities of situatedness-in-displacement' (1998: 250). A closer look at Seth's work aims to show that there are many different ways of being cosmopolitan, above and beyond those politically 'sanctioned' by Marxist, nationalist or postcolonial critical categorizations. Through an analysis of his poetry, *The Golden Gate*, and *Two Lives*, I aim to show that Seth's cosmopolitanism is peculiarly resistant to theoretical categories, and needs a different sort of approach from those offered by current critiques of his writing. I then will move on to examine the shifts in cosmopolitan perspective in Rushdie's later novels. By comparing the different forms of cosmopolitanism in the two writers, I aim to reach a better understanding of the ways in which literary cosmopolitanism always treads an uneasy path between the tendency towards the unproblematic elision of cultural difference in the name of 'literary value', and a more balanced attention to the problematics of cultural translation inscribed in the texts. One can argue that the canon of world literature is premised precisely on this wildly unsteady tension, always unsettled by the vagaries of transnational reception and the unequal processes of publishing distribution.

Seth's cosmopolitanism

Seth's changing cosmopolitan attitudes can be explored by following his evolution as a writer, and the way in which they are differently shaped by both his poetry and his narrative. Seth's cosmopolitan attitude, especially in his early poems, translates into a profound homesickness, as the poem 'Divali' testifies. Written about the poet's return to India after three years of living and studying in Britain, 'that lonely hankering' for home, he quickly realizes, conceals an illusory fantasy

to 'belong' again to the place he left. What divides him from his fellow-citizens is 'this separateness, this fear' represented by English; a classic diasporic crisis is contained in the perception that Anglicization has placed him at a remove from his home – 'I know that the whole world / Means exile for our breed / Who are not home at home / And are abroad abroad' (Seth 1995: 68, 'Divali'). And yet at the same time, English offers him his only real choice of an identity, and perhaps even a home, though he clearly feels trapped under the weight of its colonial and literary tradition: 'English: beloved language / Of Jonson, Wordsworth's tongue – / These my "meridian names" Whose grooves I crawl along' (Seth 1995: 66). Locatedness and displacement are equally at work in Seth's writing, without there being ever a politicization of this subject-position. His use of canonical genres and structured poetic forms – the realist novel, the sonnet, the novel in verse – allow for an exploration of the diasporic consciousness that tends to privilege an undivided self, a naturalized relationship with the environment, which is very different from Rushdie and other postcolonial writers. With the possible exception of the early poems mentioned above, there is a lack of alienation in Seth (or the lack of foregrounding of this alienation), and a lack of diasporic anxiety about location. His writing

> challenges the assumption that absence of geographical rootedness necessarily leads to alienation or psychological deracination … Neither does Seth's work fall back on predictable fictional thematic preoccupations of rootlessness and displacement, privileged in cosmopolitan discourse.
>
> (Pandurang 2004: 176)

Seth's evolution as a writer followed an unusual trajectory, in the sense that for many years it was an 'unofficial' activity while he was pursuing his Ph.D. in economics at Stanford University. Seth's deliberate espousal of a realist vein in his poetical and prose writing seems to signal 'a conventional masculinity, which might consider poetry as an inferior vocation' (Chandra 2004: 31). Both Seth and his family considered his writing as a sort of 'side-activity' to a proper 'job'; his recognition as a writer was all very well, but what about his 'real' work, i.e. his academic career? Seth's decision, to give up his Ph.D. altogether and go back to India to write his 'Indian novel' (which would become *A Suitable Boy*), after the success of his novel in verse *The Golden Gate*, certainly went against the most ingrained family values about completing the tasks one had set oneself (Seth 2005: 39). His poems display an ironic weariness with his dreary doctoral work: 'Float on, o facts and facts / Distilled compendia of past acts, / Reveal the grand design to me, / Flotilla of my PhD' (Seth 1995: 91, 'Research in Jiangsu Province').

Anxiety may denote a desire for belonging, or for a recuperation of the filiative relationship to a 'natal' culture; Seth substitutes this anxiety for belonging with the much more 'existential' (and universalizing) loneliness of the (male) individual. His writing often features scenes of men wandering alone, experiencing a numbing solitude, as at the beginning of *The Golden Gate* (1986: 3):

> To make a start more swift than weighty,
> Hail Muse. Dear Reader, once upon
> A time, say, circa 1980,
> There lived a man. His name was John.
> Successful in his field though only
> Twenty-six, respected, lonely,
> One evening as he walked across
> Golden Gate Park, the ill-judged toss
> Of a red frisbee almost brained him.
> He thought, 'If I died, who'd be sad?
> Who'd weep? Who'd gloat? Who would be glad?
> Would anybody?' As it pained him,
> He turned from this dispiriting theme
> To ruminations less extreme.

In 'Love and Work', the poet remarks how 'the boredom pulps my brain / And there is nothing at day's end to help assuage the pain. / I am alone, as I have usually been.' (Seth 1995: 140). 'Sunday night in the house. / The blinds drawn, the phone dead. / The sounds of the kettle, the rain. / Supper: Cheese, celery, bread.' (Seth 1995: 126). The poems trace a profoundly autobiographical narrative of Seth's time in England, California, China and India; indeed the mood is often confessional, and the persona is almost always identifiable with the poet himself. The frequent use of the present tense in the poems renders the personal immediacy even more strongly. Seth never abandons a very polished linguistic register that occasionally slides into colloquialism but is generally free from experimentation; the syntax is regular, with relatively few enjambments. Seth's lyrical poetry is by its very genre more cosmopolitan, perhaps, than his narrative works, because its language is more expressive of Seth's persona – of his individual poetic style – than his setting or milieu.

Whereas Seth's use of English in *A Suitable Boy* might be more akin to a literary recreation of Indian English, the English of his poetry and other works is much closer to a 'world literary' English. In his first collection, *Mappings*, Seth still seems to be finding his own voice. He thematizes the ideas of exile, being away from home, writing in a language which is not his mother-tongue. He constructs a diasporic persona, that later re-emerges in *From Heaven Lake*; language becomes his home. Seth justifies his use of rhyme because of its obvious memorability and its more inexplicable emotional power. Of course he recognizes that there are also potential faults with rhyme and metre as modes of poetic expression: 'too great an enchantment with artifice or with antiquated diction, a lack of breath and pulse, a confining intellectuality' (Seth 1995: p. xiv). These drawbacks occasionally surface in the reading of the poems, though it is more a problem with the relatively untested and youthful sentiments than with the metre. They seem to be more stylistic exercises than mature pieces of poetry.

In *All You Who Sleep Tonight* (1991) Seth's poetry displays a cosmopolitan sensibility by adopting the voices of others – either translating freely from other

poetic traditions or literary texts (Urdu poetry, the *Babur Nama*), or personifying other people in books or histories he's read: the rabbi in the Lodz ghetto, the commander of Auschwitz. The juxtaposition of these different voices in the collection detaches the poetic persona from a groundedness in any single national tradition or history. At other times, the poetry is almost always resolutely autobiographical or descriptive. The realist tone is continued in *The Humble Administrator's Garden*; 'The Comfortable Classes at Work and Play' presents a link between the narrative and lyrical modes that is later developed in *The Golden Gate*. The affectionate, humorous style in which the members of his family are depicted, especially the grandmother who complains she is 'unloved' – an evident template for Mrs Rupa Mehra – foreshadows the narrative voice of *A Suitable Boy*.

The poetic mode establishes 'a humane but personal core of cosmopolitanism' (Pandurang 2004: 184), and Seth's later work develops this relationship between the personal and the cosmopolitan first sketched out in his verse. It recalls Leela Gandhi's formulation of an 'affective cosmopolitanism', a non-communitarian yet open-ended understanding of one's self in the world, which she defines in terms of xenophilia, or a politics of friendship. Gandhi defends a utopian mentality, which 'shows the way forward to a genuine cosmopolitanism: always open to the risky arrival of those not quite, not yet, covered by the privileges which secure our identity and keep us safe' (Gandhi 2006: 31). Hers is precisely *not* the cosmopolitanism of Kant:

> in its affective mutation … cosmopolitanism may well be the means to puncture those fantasies of security and invulnerability to which our political imagination remains hostage. It might, for instance, teach us that risk sometimes brings with it a profound affirmation of relationality and collectivity.
>
> (Ibid.: 32)

Seth's poetry aptly illustrates Gandhi's 'affective cosmopolitanism': 'How fine it is to share the world and not / its need when there are those who weep for food. / Their children's limbs will atrophy, brains rot / Swollen for lack of it, while "all things good", / Food shelter, health, are mine; interests; loves; / The time to walk through avocado groves. / /Living abroad, I have lost sight of home. / Locked in my web I have grown happily blind / And blindly happy, and and few images come / To jar the fine threads of my peace of mind' (Seth 1995: 72). Seth's awareness of the privilege inherent in his cosmopolitan position frequently surfaces in his poetry, *pace* those who accuse him of being apolitical and deracinated. The cosmopolitan in literature is critiqued because it 'displays impatience, even hostility, to the legacy of decolonization and is filled with parodic or dismissive references to the exalted "people" of the liberation movements' (Brennan 1997: 39). For Brennan the postcolonial writer has a duty to be anti-imperialist as well; this also entails a series of aesthetic prescriptions, such as that 'literature must guard against giving vent to the isolated intellectual's disillusionment and weariness' (ibid.: 40). Brennan's argument, though extremely provocative, is oddly censorious and rather moralistic; irony is seen as politically suspect, while 'impassioned sarcasm' is the

only 'appropriate stylistic element for historical action' (ibid.). These statements also tend to resonate worryingly with nativist directions in contemporary Indian criticism. The attitude of the Indian critics is that Indian writers should be foregrounding Indian culture, and transmitting Indian values in their writing. Hence the many accusations of 'consumerism' and 'Westernization' levelled at Seth's novel in verse, *The Golden Gate*, because it is set in California and does not feature a single Indian character (see Gupta 1990).

On the contrary, Seth's writing engages rather intensely with cultural and individual alienation. *An Equal Music* dwells on the difficulties faced by Michael Holme, the protagonist, who becomes a musician despite his working-class origins, and his resulting alienation in the course of the novel is deeply implicated with class issues. The beginning of *An Equal Music* is reminiscent of *The Golden Gate*: a man all alone in a park, thinking his own thoughts – a figure of solitude. The two novels have very similar structures. Michael Holme, like John, cuts himself off from everything when he is rejected by his lover Julia; he gives up his job in the quartet he plays with, and almost gives up playing music. As in *The Golden Gate*, a partial reconciliation with humanity and life happens at the end of the book. Michael goes to listen to a concert where Julia is playing, and finds that the music is able to provide at least partial solace for the many bitter disappointments of life.

In my view, Seth's attention to form makes him look 'suspect' in terms of his postcolonial credentials. Being rather old-fashioned in his approach to writing, he is not experimental in form or genre; he writes sonnets, tetrameters, terza rima, blank verse, realist prose and realist fiction. The form is not resisting or 'abrogating' colonial literary tradition in any way, in the sense that he does not overtly 'disrupt' the textual discourse with indigenous forms, the way Raja Rao does in his novel *Kanthapura*, for example. His works present a narrative voice that integrally belongs to its cultural environment in linguistic and discursive terms. Full immersion is his approach to the complexities of cultural difference. He learns Chinese well enough to be able to translate three classical Chinese poets into English. As Seth says about *A Suitable Boy*: 'I wanted, of course, to tell a good story, but I also wanted to set things right. No matter how well a novel is received by readers or critics in general, if it does not ring true with those people who know from the inside the world it describes, it is in the final analysis an artistic failure' (Seth 2005: 40). The translatability of his writing, alongside the careful and painstaking attention to location in terms of language, form, characters and dialogues, defines him as a cosmopolitan who does not betray a postcolonial anxiety about the politics of literary form, unlike many of his contemporaries.

Seth explicitly elaborates a cosmopolitan position in two of his works: *From Heaven Lake* (1983), a narrative about his travels through China, Tibet and Nepal, and his memoir of his uncle and aunt, *Two Lives* (2005). *From Heaven Lake* is remarkable for the cultural insights that emerge out of the encounter between an Indian traveller and the Chinese and Tibetans he meets along the way. It often brings to mind Ghosh's much more celebrated travel narrative *In an Antique Land*, in its side-stepping of the Western subject as the normally privileged interlocutor in the inter-cultural account. Throughout the text, we see how the first-person

narrator is quick to perceive the humanity of the people he meets, disregarding officialdom or the suspicion that initially marks their meetings. The truck-driver Sui, who drives Seth across the border from China to Tibet, is an example of the 'located' cosmopolitan that the writer himself aspires to:

> [Sui] has a way of treating people as individuals rather than representatives of types, that precludes any sense of cultural superiority. His friends and acquaintances along the route are Han and Tibetan … Unlike some of his fellow drivers and army buddies he has not once indicated any dislike of Lhasa or Tibet or of Tibetans. For him it is not 'New Zealand' but home.
>
> (Seth 1987: 74)

The inter-cultural meditations that Seth develops in this book, through the immediacy of the present tense and a very vivid first-person narrator, concern the relationship between India and China. 'If India and China were amicable towards each other, almost half the world would be at peace. Yet friendship rests on understanding; and the two countries, despite their contiguity, have had almost no contact in the course of history' (ibid.: 177–8). It is the figure of the traveller, in fact an Indian traveller who is completely fluent in Chinese and is equipped with a good amount of empathy and humour and openness, that may be able to effect this inter-cultural bridging and a hard-won cosmopolitan position:

> But on a personal level, to learn about another great culture is to enrich one's life, to understand one's own country better, to feel more at home in the world, and indirectly to add to that reservoir of individual goodwill that may, generations from now, temper the cynical use of national power.
>
> (Ibid.: 178)

Seth tests out empirically the ways in which we can extend hospitality to others, and tends to take difference on board in the assumption of a shared solidarity, 'a perceived unity masking practical multiplicity' (Aravamudan 2006: 13).

In *From Heaven Lake*, Seth has an ethnographic interest in describing the people, cultures and politics he meets along the way. Detachment, a critical and 'objective' observation of cultures, abounds in his story, further enhanced by the use of the narrative present. There is an emphasis on human commonality of experience rather than a foregrounding of cultural difference. Anderson argues that the use of omniscience in artistic realism in the Victorian period is a sign of the detachment that is a precondition for the enjoyment and production of aesthetics; so a sign of Seth's cosmopolitanism in formal terms might be his use of omniscient narration in *A Suitable Boy*, and his observant persona in *From Heaven Lake*. Detachment is seen as a sign of sociability; objectivity is understood to be accessibility to all. Anderson also emphasizes the ethical dimensions of a detached stance; she calls it a 'regulative ideal' rather than any pure or absolute objectivity. Cosmopolitanism as an ethical stance is similar to the cosmopolitan position in Seth's writing: the persona of the artist in the text becomes almost a touchstone

ensuring its communicability, also thanks to the use of the confessional mode, that draws the reader close by enabling an identification with the author.

'True' art is seen to possess a universal communicability, which is perhaps why Seth comes across as wary of the sacerdotal role of critics and tends to exalt the common reader. In *The Golden Gate*, some real scorn is heaped upon fickle and fashionable art critics, who only praise the work of the young sculptor Janet Hayakawa after she dies tragically in a car accident. In this communicable notion of art, where cultural difference is not foregrounded (unlike in Rushdie), translation acquires a certain pre-eminence. A number of different literary traditions and languages enter into dialogue, rather than collision, in his texts.

From Heaven Lake ends when Seth's plane from Kathmandu lands in Delhi: 'I am home in half an hour', which is the last line of the book (Seth 1987: 178). What we notice here is the emphasis on the personal in relation to home and the wide world. The whole narrative is actually an account of Seth's returning *home* after three years spent in China – though the story only recounts his latest travels through China and Tibet, it is tempered by nostalgia and homesickness. The rootedness of his Indian citizenship and his Indian family are paradoxically what makes it possible for him to engage so deeply with China and its inhabitants, delineating a position which Pheng Cheah and Bruce Robbins have named 'cosmopolitics' – 'cosmopolitics is by no means necessarily postnational politics' (Robbins 1998: 8). Seth, influenced by his reading of Naipaul's *India: A Wounded Civilization*, makes a series of comparisons between India and China. He compares the merits and demerits of China versus India. Literacy, social care, population control – all are pros for China. And yet Seth recognizes that, for all that, India has one thing China hasn't: a democratic government, albeit not always well-functioning. Moreover,

> the Indian achievement of the last thirty years has been in a different, more nebulous, and in a sense more difficult direction. The country has not fragmented: a whole generation of Indians has grown up accepting that an independent and united India is the normal state of affairs. In the first few years of a nation, that is already a great deal: one cannot expect a powerful patriotism. A country with more than a dozen languages, with no strong historical tradition of unity, faces problems that a culturally and linguistically cohesive China does not even have to consider.
>
> (Seth 1987: 105)

Seth's idea of the Indian nation can be said to be firmly based in a strong sense of the state, as has been thoroughly discussed in the preceding chapters; an interesting counter-balance to the globalized flows that seem to characterize postcolonial identities in contemporary discussions. Thus I would argue that a responsible and located cosmopolitanism is actually linked to a strong national sense. However, it differs from the secularist position of the narrator in *A Suitable Boy*, whose representation is firmly rooted in an Indian national and state context, while *From Heaven Lake* is a travel narrative. One could say that Seth's cosmopolitanism is

a precondition for the articulation of a nationally oriented secularism that attempts to engage with India's most 'present needs', i.e. the problems of governing a multicultural and multi-religious polity. Robbins rightly identifies the 'problems with separating nation from the state, cut loose from the structured accountability and the sacrifices that accompany old-fashioned citizenship' (1998: 11). One such disjunction in India, he argues, has led to the rise of Hindu fundamentalism that culminated in the Ayodhya episode of 1992, which was funded in large part by NRI Hindus. At times there seems to be a lack of fit between citizenship and cosmopolitanism; how can the two be made to work together? Citizenship entails responsibilities and sacrifices, while the risk seems to be that cosmopolitanism might be disengaged from these. It seems that maybe Seth's cosmopolitanism is precisely of this 'located' nature, whose structures of feeling look beyond the nation while retaining a sense of its rights and responsibilities. Cheah, in a very illuminating analysis of Kant's essay 'To Perpetual Peace', argues that it is 'anachronistic to regard cosmopolitanism as an intellectual ethic as something that comes after or seeks to transcend an anterior mass-based nationalism'. At the time in which Kant was writing, i.e. before Napoleon and the spread of popular nationalism in Europe, cosmopolitanism is understood as 'a universal humanism that transcends regional particularism, which is not defined *nationally*, because in a Europe made of absolutist dynastic states, the popular national state did not yet exist' (Cheah 1998: 22). Cheah rightly places Kant's project in its historical context, showing that the rise of cosmopolitanism as a political-ethical project *predates* the rise of popular nation-states, and was not formulated in antagonism to them. For Cheah, 'Kant's vision of cosmopolitical right asserted in the name of a common humanity attempts to provide an ideal institutional framework for regulating the anarchic behavior of states' (ibid.: 23–4).

Thus Kant's notion of cosmopolitanism is not anti- or post-nationalist, but *pre-nationalist*; 'prior to its annexation of the territorial state nationalism is not antithetical to cosmopolitanism' (ibid.: 25). Furthermore, '[T]he secondary understanding of cosmopolitanism that opposes it to nationalism and sometimes equates it with exilic migrancy only makes sense after the nation has been bonded to the territorial state, which then naturalizes its boundaries through official nationalism' (ibid.: 26). *From Heaven Lake* flirts with this 'exilic migrancy', but from a firmly national perspective. His travels in Nepal and Tibet are always edged with the anxiety of returning home: 'I must be in Delhi at the end of the month, not only because of what I have written to my parents, but also because my travel pass and resident permit will have expired by that time' (Seth 1987: 42).

In *Two Lives*, Seth's cosmopolitanism seems less anchored to a national perspective, and focuses on the motifs of loss and statelessness as ties that bind together the two lives at the centre of this book. *Two Lives*, written after *A Suitable Boy*, begins to question the belief in a firm identification between nation and state. Here Seth deepens his commitment to realism by shifting from fictional to biographical narrative. It is a kind of 'double' memoir of his great-uncle, Shanti Seth, and his wife Henny, a German Jew. The fulcrum of the book, rather than nation, is family. Shanti Seth was born in Biswan, Northern India, in 1908, then

went to Berlin to study dentistry, just before Hitler's rise to power; here he met Henny and her family and became very close to them and their circle of friends. He then moved to Britain, and when the war broke out, he enrolled as a dentist in a British regiment. An intriguing question, that Seth never explores, is why Shanti enrolled in the first place; this fact raises interesting issues about his relationship to his identity as a British imperial subject, and his perceived loyalty to Britain. (More than 2.5 million Indians volunteered to fight in the Second World War.) Seth does indignantly mention the fact that the viceroy of India, Lord Linlithgow, declared war on behalf of India without consulting Congress or any of the leading nationalist figures. But this act clearly did not affect Shanti's decision to commit to a war that was not his own.

While he was stationed in Montecassino, where fighting between Germans and allied troops was particularly intense, he lost his right arm. Throughout the war, he maintained an intense correspondence with Henny, who had managed to escape from Germany in 1939. She was alone, had very little money and was desperately anxious about the fate of her mother and sister who had remained in Germany, and who died in concentration camps (though she found out about this only when the war was over). After the war, Shanti and Henny were reunited in London, and in 1951 they got married. The book, as Seth himself acknowledges, has a complex structure – 'a double biography, an intertwined meditation, where the author is an anomalous third braid, sometimes visible, sometimes not' (Seth 2005). It is more than just an 'edited' biography of the couple; the two characters are clearly presented in their relation to Seth, their story is closely connected to his own. At the end of the book, we learn that he has partly written this book to assuage and work through a sense of personal grievance towards his uncle who, despite his great love for Seth's mother, left her nothing in his will. There is a slightly uneven structure to the book, and in this sense it is probably the least 'polished' of all his works, because the narrator's unease with the behaviour of the main protagonist cannot always be kept at bay or worked smoothly into the plot. A particularly interesting strand of this narrative consists of Seth's reflections on Germany, the Holocaust and on Israel, and gives us some insight as to how an Indian writer who has written extensively in defence of secularism might deal with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. He maintains a secular stance in this discussion as well, and expresses dismay at the fact that, despite the experience of the Holocaust, Israel has adopted such persecutory policies towards Arabs. Seth's experience of communal conflict in India, so eloquently portrayed in *A Suitable Boy*, makes him sceptical of states like Israel in which religion and ethnicity are equated with nationality. He feels that no state that deliberately prefers one religion over another can guarantee equality and justice to its citizens. He upholds the ideals of peace and tolerance, suggesting that the lessons of the Holocaust might be able to teach us something for the future, while constantly keeping the emphasis on the 'little' stories:

> It is also the lessons of history writ little that may be taken to heart – the sense that the actions and decisions of ordinary individuals, trivial or momentous, may lead, sometimes by imperceptible gradations, sometimes by sudden

> jolts, and not even always in the same direction, towards making the world a humane and reasonably secure home for all its denizens or a riven and uncertain place of grief and injustice, fear, hunger and pain.
>
> (Ibid.: 348)

Seth comments that given Germany's past, it might have an important role in future in counteracting the worst excesses of nationalism, perhaps making Germans happier to 'emphasise that part of themselves that said "Bavarian" or "European" or "world citizen" and to de-emphasise, in their composite identity, their Germanness' (ibid.: 349). Moreover, Germany might lead the way for that transnational or supranational grouping, Europe, as 'many Germans, aware of their history, are keen to contain and restrain its historical impulses within the structure of a wider Europe, one which no single power can dominate' (ibid.). But even Europe runs the risk of being a Christian club, warns Seth, if it doesn't open up to Turkey, who in turn, must amend its human rights record to 'accord with those of liberal democracies' (ibid.: 346). Seth's espousal of a supranational grouping such as Europe in this book shows an interesting contrast with his rather statist version of nationalism in *A Suitable Boy*. *Two Lives* marks a political shift in Seth's writings, in which nation and state are no longer considered so indissoluble, as he reflects upon the horrors of Nazi Germany and the crimes of the Israeli state against the Palestinians. His choice to focus on other nations than India allows him to critique the concept of nation which appears as a more 'naturalized' formation in *A Suitable Boy*.

Seth devotes considerable space to Henny's correspondence with her friends back in Germany, in which she attempts a painful process of coming to terms with her past and with that of her erstwhile homeland. After the war, her sense of solidarity with her compatriots has fragmented along very clear lines: those who were consciously in opposition to the regime, or at least tried to have as little to do with it as possible, and those who collaborated willingly with it. Even more shockingly, some of these so-called friends did nothing to help Henny's sister and mother who were first imprisoned by the Gestapo, and then sent to the concentration camps in Theresienstadt and Birkenau, where they died.

Two Lives was the fruit of extensive historical documentation. Seth spends a considerable time on the event of the Holocaust, or rather on his own personal reactions to it; and this accounts for a strange moment in his research, when he develops almost an allergy to the German language, while reading through the Nazi documents attesting to the transportation of Henny's sister and mother to the concentration camps. His easy feeling of being at home in the world, in all cultures, has momentarily stopped short; he has lost his love for German. It is the language of his beloved *lieder*, and he loves many of its composers and poets; but it now holds such terrible associations for him, having become the language through which atrocities were ordered and executed, that it is impossible for him to speak it or read for quite a while. It seems that the Holocaust has engendered its own form of cosmopolitanism, emerging from the rejection of nationalistic excesses. Ultimately, the book can be read as an example of cosmopolitan lifeways: the

detailed account of how two lives of this century can restore to the reader a human commonality of experience, 'behind every door on every ordinary street, in every hut in every ordinary village on this middling planet of a trivial star' (Seth 2005: 498). The personal narrative points towards a modicum of peace and understanding of the other: 'If we cannot eschew hatred, at least let us eschew group hatred. May we see that we could have been born as each other. May we, in short, believe in humane logic and perhaps, in due course, in love' (ibid.).[4]

This memoir may have something in common with the 'public' biography in modern and contemporary Indian literature. Indian life-histories, written in English, tend to focus on the ways in which the individual relates to contemporary political and historical events, with little exploration of the private self, an example being Nehru's autobiography. Though *Two Lives* contains much that is private, including letters and communications so personal that Seth occasionally feels reluctant to share them with the readers, Seth adds a more 'public' dimension to this life story by reflecting on the relationship between Henny and the German nation. He attempts this so that

> the perspective of the story, told so far mainly through dense description of personal lives, may be opened out. So is the risk that a wider perspective may lead one somewhat far afield from the actual 'Two Lives' of the title and from the web of those they knew

– but Seth feels this is a necessary risk (Seth 2005: 340). However, he does not explore Shanti's Indian identity to the same extent, and his own complex relation to England. Shanti opted to live in Britain in order to escape the constraints and obligations of the Indian extended family. But at the same time, Shanti's and Henny's lives have been profoundly shaped by the nation, also because, as Cheah points out, the very concept of exilic migrancy is premised on the primary referent of the nation. This is a story of intricate and shifting allegiances towards nationality; Seth has pulled off the feat of telling a story about diaspora, exile and the politics of home, without really questioning the bedrock foundation of the characters' identities. 'Humane logic' and 'love' are the unquestioned bases for Seth's exploration of cosmopolitan identity. Both Shanti and Henny, effectively, renounce their country and choose to live in exile. But Shanti and Henny find 'in their fellow exile a home'. They speak to each other in German, and to their extended family in English; and yet Henny rarely mentioned her Jewishness, and never spoke to her husband about the deaths of her mother and sister at the hands of fellow-Germans.

Love and cosmopolitanism

There is another, minor strand of cosmopolitanism that can be identified in Seth's writing about homoerotic love. Leela Gandhi's theory of minority argues that anarchism, anti-colonial movements, animal activism and homosexuality were grouped together in the same camp by the nineteenth-century establishment.

What developed out of this association was 'a new politics of unlikely conjunction and conjuncture according to which sexual dissidence, the struggle for animal rights … , religious heterodoxy, pro-suffrage activism and socialism could each be regarded as varieties of anti-imperialism' (2006: 8). Gandhi's discussion of homosexuality has some resonance with Seth's articulation of a bisexual identity in his writings, and the occasional surfacing of a minoritarian cosmopolitanism. Does Seth's bisexuality construct a further exilic distance from 'home', and could it be seen to make him belong to the camp of the 'minority cosmopolitans'?

Seth is openly bisexual in his verse – 'in the strict ranks / of Gay and Straight / What is my status? / Stray? or Great?' (Seth 1995: 46); yet he never dwells in a sustained manner on homoeroticism, though his works often depict gay and bisexual relationships. They are always represented as marginal, even furtive, like the brief affair between Maan Kapoor and Firoz in *A Suitable Boy*. The potentially explosive consequences of this liaison – a gay relationship between a Hindu and a Muslim in 1950s small-town India – are not, however, explored fully in the text. The whole thing is dismissed as a casual youthful fling, though in a non-judgemental manner. At times gay liaisons are guilt-ridden, as in *The Golden Gate*, in which the character Ed's religious scruples get in the way of his romance with Phil. Seth's narratives privilege heterosexual love (with the exception of his poetry). His standard line is that passion has no place in marriage, ascribable to a rather vaguely defined 'Indian' ethos about the importance of family values above romantic love. About the love between Shanti and Henny, he concludes, rather tritely:

> They believed in each other's abilities, in each other's character and in each other's love. It may not have been a requited passionate romance, but it was a deep and abiding concern. Beset by life, isolated in the world, in each other they found a strong and sheltering harbour. What is perfect? In a world with so much suffering, isolation and indifference, it is cause for gratitude if something is sufficiently good.
>
> (Seth 2005: 435)

Seth's understanding of love is often veined with a deep sadness – though the tone is usually light and often wonderfully humorous, there is a tragic core to it, and few really happy endings. Saeeda Bai, Maan Kapoor's beloved in *A Suitable Boy*, is knifed by Maan himself; and one of the last depressing scenes in *A Suitable Boy* is the image of Kabir wandering disconsolately along the banks of the Ganges while Lata's wedding is taking place in the same city. Many times in the narrative there is a rejection of fulfilment. The deep sadness and the light humour are often left unreconciled in the text; and at times the conclusions of the narrator are facile, in this regard, leaving the reader with a sense of dissatisfaction.

Despite shifts in genre and form, there are some clear continuities in Seth's œuvre. *A Suitable Boy*'s rejection of passion finds very similar echoes in *The Golden Gate*. John, the protagonist, is a handsome, lonely and successful yuppie living in 1980s San Francisco. Through the coaxing of his artist and musician friend

Janet Hayakawa, he places a personal ad in a newspaper and begins a passionate relationship with Elizabeth Dorati, a beautiful blonde lawyer of Italian origin, whose parents own a vineyard. But the romantic idyll is quickly cut short by John's jealousy and arrogance, and by Liz's realization that what she wants is stability and companionship, not necessarily love. This insight is further sharpened by her discovery that her mother is ill with cancer; the certainties of family values suddenly become most important for Liz. Within a week of breaking up with John, she marries the homely but engaging Phil, John's best friend, who has previously had an affair with Liz's brother, Ed, the owner of an iguana and a devout Catholic with aspirations to asceticism (his fanatic religious streak is what eventually puts paid to Ed and Phil's romance). John is left alone, feeling abandoned and betrayed by his nearest and dearest. However, his friend Janet does not forsake him, and love slowly grows between them. But even this blossoming relationship is ended by her death in a car accident. At the end of the novel, John, grieving and alone, slowly finds the courage to pick up the phone to call Phil and Liz, with whom he has broken all contact. On the whole, relationships in this novel are characterized by a return to traditional values as a marker of a more 'mature' modernity, as well as a 'sidestepping of the overtly political' (Multani 2004: 75–6).

Perhaps another way to read *The Golden Gate*'s dismissiveness about passion is from a minoritarian perspective on sexuality. Both Indian and Western romantic mores are ultimately defeated by a condition of exilic loneliness, uncertainty and fear. Passion between two people is not strong enough to sustain itself. The individual ultimately needs the comfort, support and solidity given by familial ties. Thus the tentative minoritarian cosmopolitanism suggested in Seth's homoerotic narratives is constantly subsumed into a more 'filiative' notion of belonging and identity whose narrative teleology corresponds to traditional heterosexual marriage.

Rushdie and his cities: imperial and rooted cosmopolitanism

In Rushdie and Seth we find a number of variants on the theme of cosmopolitanism, which alternates between a 'globalized' or 'colonial' variety and a more rooted variety. The evolution of Rushdie's cosmopolitanism is linked to his representation of the Indian postcolonial city. In *Midnight's Children* and in *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*, Bombay appears as radically secular, its located cosmopolitanism constantly emerging out of its landscapes and the experiences of its inhabitants, and is not imported from the West. The progression of the cityscape represents, seemingly, a progression in the self-fulfilment of the characters. Rushdie's 2001 novel *Fury* appears as the product of an 'imperial' cosmopolitan position (as I will explain below), that has some interesting links with Henry James's *The Golden Bowl* (1904).

This novel is usually associated with James's 'late style' as a writer, paralleled by its solid positioning within the context of late-empire Britain. The cosmopolitan outlook of the novel is synonymous with an imperial gaze. The beginning of the

novel equates London with imperial Rome, and the character Amerigo stops before a shop window in which 'objects massive and lumpish, in silver and gold, in the forms to which precious stones contribute, or in leather, steel, brass, applied to a hundred uses and abuses, were as tumbled together as if, in the insolence of the Empire, they had been the loot of far-off victories' (James 1985 [1904]: 43). James's novel is set almost entirely in London, the seat of the empire, and the Italian aristocrat Amerigo is caught up as a willing subject in this regal, powerful, city. Early passages in *Fury* recall this willing subjection of the foreigner and the migrant, Professor Malik Solanka, to the imperial city and its reaches, which in this case is New York; an eager surrender of the peripheral to the metropolitan. At the beginning of *Fury*, we find a similar catalogue of objects from all parts of the world to be found in this city, caught by the eye of the foreign *flâneur*: 'Such plundering and jumbling of the store-house of yesterday's empires, this melting-pot or *métissage* of past power, was the true indicator of present might' (Rushdie 2001: 43). The imperial gaze can afford to be cosmopolitan, since colonial difference is commercialized and offered as spectacle. In *Fury*, interestingly, Solanka goes to America, 'in the highest hour of its hybrid, omnivorous power', to forget his own history and to remake himself (ibid.: 44): 'No longer a historian but a man without histories let me be. I'll rip my lying mother tongue out of my throat and speak your broken English instead' (ibid.: 51).

This imperial cosmopolitanism differs from one that is geographically located, attentive to locality, embedded and not forgetful of one's own cultural experience and national allegiances, as is the case in *Midnight's Children*. The above quote from *Fury* reframes the famous lines from *Shame*, whose narrator anticipates the South Asian critiques of himself, a foreigner who presumes to write about a country (Pakistan) that he has left: *'Outsider! Trespasser! You have no right to this subject!* … I know: nobody ever arrested me. Nor are they ever likely to. *Poacher! Pirate! We reject your authority. We know you, with your foreign language wrapped around you like a flag: speaking about us in your forked tongue, what can you tell but lies?'* (Rushdie 1983: 28). His is automatically considered a lying tongue, *angrezi*, foreign speech. But in *Fury* this 'lying tongue' seems to have been voluntarily and indeed happily traded in for an easier idiom, that of the imperial metropolis. In New York, everyone is a foreigner, and there are no nativist suspicions about deracination. Cosmopolitan equals metropolitan in this sort of fiction, and money makes up a large part of this equation: 'The city boiled with money', says the narrator of *Fury*, and *The Golden Bowl* abounds with metaphors about money regarding both people and things. In contemporary literature, the obvious parallel with late-imperial novels such as James's is to be found in what James Annesley calls 'fictions of globalization'. This term encompasses 'the continuities that tie contemporary fiction's concern for globalizing consumer culture with American literature's enduring preoccupation with business, economics and the market' (Annesley 2006: 6–7). *Fury* quite clearly sets out to be Rushdie's 'American' novel, but in a manner very different to the way in which *The Golden Gate* is Seth's Californian novel. First, it is set in New York, which becomes the 'everyplace', the non-place because it collects people from all over the world. Rushdie's critics have noticed a marked shift in his political

allegiances over the course of his novels (not to mention his essays). In the post-*fatwa* and post-9/11 phase (though of course *Fury* was published before the event had happened), especially in *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*, *Fury*, and to some extent even *Shalimar the Clown*, Rushdie seems to be unashamedly embracing globalization and its benefits for the privileged protagonists of his fictions. One critic, Cécile Leonard, has noted how in *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* and *Fury* 'the question of postcolonial identity so prevalent in the earlier novels is progressively diluted into a broader interrogation on individuality and community' (2005: 101). Leonard also notes how 'the global has nothing of a coercive system in the recent novels … rather globalization is a frame in which migrants – the same postcolonial migrants who used to people his former plots – freely negotiate their identity' (ibid.: 102). Solanka's arrival in New York City differs immensely from the landing of Saladin on the shores of England in *The Satanic Verses*. There is no literal demonization of the migrant of Solanka, as happens with Saladin; 1980s London, with its Thatcherite racist hysteria, is worlds away from the shiny, equable, wealthy environment of the Upper West Side where Solanka is living at the beginning of the new millennium. Indeed, in the city, Solanka can reinvent himself and make a fortune out of the dolls that he makes, and is recognized on the streets as a minor celebrity. Clearly the South Asian migrant has come a very long way from the horned devil that Saladin is transformed into through the force of racist imagination. New York is embraced by the narrator and by Solanka as a city that bolsters the self-esteem and self-fufilment of its protagonist; the American dream rather naively comes true. Economic globalization brings together disparate peoples and cultures, and this has been often interpreted, in a kind of over-eager shorthand, for a new era in the history of cultural flows; as Fredric Jameson points out, 'the positing of an enlargement of communicational nets has secretly been transformed into some kind of message about a new world culture' (1998: 56). But ultimately, all this means is that money is the prime determinant in the direction and hierarchy of these cultural flows (as the narrator comments ironically):

> Everywhere on earth – in Britain, in India, in distant Lilliput – people were obsessed by the subject of success in America. Neela was a celebrity back home because she had got herself a good job – 'made it big' – in the American media… . American success had become the only real validation of one's worth … No one knew how to argue with money these days, and all the money was here in the Promised Land.
>
> (Rushdie 2001: 224)

It is interesting to note in this context that all the main characters in *Fury* are either immigrants or minorities. The link between globalization, cosmopolitanism and language in Rushdie is particularly evident in the description of Bombay-speak in *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*:

> Bombay's garbage argot, *Mumbai ki kachrapati baat-cheet*, in which a sentence could begin in one language, swoop through a second and even a third and

> then swing back round to the first. Our acronymic name for it was *Hug-me*. Hindi Urdu Gujarati Marathi English.
>
> (Rushdie 1999: 7)

As Leonard puts it in relation to *Fury*, 'the novel features, through language, the very stratification, or coexistence, that characterizes the global world' (2005: 104). In Rushdie's books, the city becomes a text to be deciphered, and the novel is often the equivalent of textual interpretation: 'If, as inhabitants of modern cities, we are readers of a text that we tour on a daily basis, then, when reading a text centred around a city we become, or rather we confirm ourselves as, readers' (Concilio 2003: 135). The city is represented as a text, as in Don DeLillo's novel *Cosmopolis* (2003). The protagonist of this novel, the billionaire Eric Packer, observes the city from the hyper-technological enclave of his limousine. In the course of the novel he surrenders himself to the city, running unnecessary risks and having multiple sexual liaisons. The city presents 'scenes that normally aroused him, the great rapacious flow, where the physical will of the city, the ego fevers, the assertions of industry, commerce and crowds shape every anecdotal moment' (DeLillo 2003: 41). As in Rushdie, globalization is represented as the irreducible reality of today's world, thus working 'to strengthen the ideological and conceptual foundations of globalization itself' (Annesley 2006: 69). Eric tells his mistress that he is a 'world citizen with a New York pair of balls', crudely equating economic and social power with masculinity and Americanness (DeLillo 2003: 26). These fictions of globalization present a total enthralment to the idea of globalization and capital, which almost literally becomes a sexual object.

In Rushdie, there is a shift of perspective from *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* to *Fury*. In the former novel, Rushdie emphasizes the radical impurity that lies at the heart of every culture, beginning with Bombay. Rushdie always represents the city through the eyes of minority communities – in *Midnight's Children*, through a Muslim family, in *The Moor's Last Sigh*, through a Catholic/Jewish family, in *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*, through the Parsi community. Bombay is just the sort of city that permits this cosmopolitan mixing. These novels depict an older cosmopolitan mix that is both linked to colonialism and precedes it, and which is finally destroyed by Hindu fundamentalism and its purist myth of origins.

In *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*, Ormus Cama writes and performs the most famous American pop songs of the 1960s and 1970s before they are even released, thanks to the dictations of his dead brother Gayomart from beyond the grave. This fact questions the supposed colonization of Indian culture by American pop music. Rushdie celebrates, rather than condemns, cultural globalization as an inevitable by-product of economic globalization. But this celebration of globalization is ambivalent. On the one hand, it is announced as emancipatory, freeing subjects from the constraints of their national cultures, and embracing change and 'newness' as significant values (a constant theme in Rushdie's fiction). On the other hand, however, *Fury*'s often uncritical celebration of the globalized city tends to overlook the risks of a 'managerial' or globalized cosmopolitanism, to use Mignolo's terms. Jameson is critical of cultural globalization because

it brings about the Americanization of the various national cultures that are affected by it:

> each national culture and daily life is a seamless web of habits and habitual practices, which form a totality or a system. It is very easy to break up such traditional cultural systems, which extend to the way people live in their bodies and use language, as well as the way they treat each other and nature. Once destroyed, these fabrics can never be recreated… . The violence of American cultural imperialism and the penetration of Hollywood film and television lie in imperialism's destruction of these traditions, which are very far from being precapitalist or quasi-religious traditions, but are rather recent and successful accommodations of the old institutions to modern technology… . But if these other countries want that … ? It will still be asked. The implication is that it is in human nature; and further, that all history has been moving toward American culture as its apotheosis. But it is rather a matter of whether we want that ourselves; because if we can imagine nothing else, then obviously we have nothing to warn about other cultures either.
>
> (Jameson 1998: 63)

Note that Jameson is *not* advocating a return to some form of pre-globalized national culture, he is rather pointing out the risk that local cultural products may lose out to the insidiously dominant form of global culture that we are all surrounded by. He emphasizes that modernity is not modular or serial, and that national cultures evolve on their own terms by incorporating 'modern technology' within their own specific aesthetic (an example might be the Bollywood film). Thus in Rushdie and Jameson we have two opposite positions on the debate about the effects of globalization on the relationships between cultures. Rushdie is clearly critical of those who warn against globalization (more in his later novels than in his earlier work), because he is against the idea of being bound by the dictates of one's own culture. His idea of culture, or rather cultures in the plural, is based on proliferation, dissemination and rebirth, rather than a belief in cultural authenticity: 'Virgil, who believed that the apiarist Aristaeus could spontaneously generate new bees from the rotting carcase of a cow, was closer to a truth about origins than all the revered old books' (Rushdie 2003: 156). The narrator of *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* is openly contemptuous of the very term culture, with its implications of blind faith and allegiance in a set concept:

> What's a 'culture'? … A squirm of germs on a glass slide is all, a laboratory experiment calling itself a society. Most of us wrigglers make do with life on that slide; we even agree to feel proud of that 'culture'. Like slaves voting for slavery or brains for lobotomy, we kneel down before the god of all moronic micro-organisms and pray to be homogenized or killed or engineered; we promise to obey.
>
> (Rushdie 1999: 95)

For Rushdie, the secular is precisely a fearless mixing of traditions, a defiant embrace of the new, against the rigid orthodoxies and divisions of national cultures. At its best, his position recalls Geeta Kapur's concept of 'secularizing tradition': 'to elicit, in consequence, not universal culture but a universal meaning out of the widely varying cultures of the world in the more advanced anthropological sense of the term *culture*' (Kapur 1998: 213).

It is this utopian premise of secularism that one must strive towards, a consciously provisional belief in the necessity for communication between cultures that allows us to effect fragile but crucial translations and comparisons. This form of secularism is akin to the 'emancipatory' cosmopolitanism discussed previously. Rushdie's writing often features diasporic subjects who cross these boundaries between cultures, and are often depicted as revolutionary, ground-breaking. The diasporic subject of Rushdie's fiction shares some traits with Seth's cosmopolitan diasporic subject. In *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*, home becomes a constraining word for the protagonists, who are constantly trying to escape Bombay. Rai, the narrator, passionately defends migrancy and homelessness as privileged epistemic positions:

> For a long while I believed … that in every generation there are a few souls, call them lucky or cursed, who are simply *born not belonging*, who come into the world semi-detached, if you like, without strong affiliation to family or location or nation or race… . And not only by that: for those who value stability, who fear transience, uncertainty, change, have erected a powerful system of stigmas and taboos against rootlessness, that disruptive, anti-social force, so that we mostly conform, we pretend to be motivated by loyalties and solidarities we do not really feel, we hide our secret identities beneath the false skins of those identities which bear the belongers' seal of approval… . And in the waking dreams our societies permit, in our myths, our arts, our songs, we celebrate the non-belongers, the different ones, the outlaws, the freaks. What we forbid ourselves we pay good money to watch, in a playhouse or movie theatre, or to read about in the secret covers of a book. Our libraries, our places of entertainment tell the truth. The tramp, the assassin, the rebel, the thief, the mutant, the outcast, the delinquent, the devil, the sinner, the traveller, the gangster, the runner, the mask: if we did not recognize in them our least-fulfilled needs, we would not invent them over and over again, in every place, in every language, in every time.
>
> (Rushdie 1999: 73)

The artist, the 'artiste', the hustler, etc., are all borderline figures, that cross boundaries and make up their own reality for themselves. Culture is never a fixed or essentialized notion in Rushdie's imagination; and cultural purity, always an anathema for him, has now become the bugbear of his later works. But it is here that a more considered examination of the limits of this cosmopolitan vision is needed. While it is true that cultural norms often move us to follow 'loyalties and identities we do not really feel', it is equally true that rootlessness is seen as a

'disruptive, anti-social force' in many societies. However, the further development of this anti-national discourse in *Fury* is troubling. No roots; but what if the ultimate goal of this flight from roots is an American passport? American identity is rather too complacently viewed in this novel as a capacious container for all migrants, which will guarantee freedom, wealth and happiness for all. But what of those who cannot, or will not, aspire to this American citizenship? Is the only possible reaction to globalization to embrace it? As Jameson says, it would be a failure of the imagination not to think of alternative realities to it. In Rushdie, the representation, and embrace, of globalization is limited to the city. Modernity is defined by the urban landscape, whereas the rural areas are seemingly untouched by modernizing nationalism. They retain an 'unmapped' quality that makes the landscape susceptible to mythical or supernatural occurrences:

> The sheer unchartedness of rural India in its most profound depths never failed to amaze. You turned off the road on to the rural tracks and at once felt as the early earth's navigators must have done; like a Cabot or Magellan of the land… . Here was a wordless truth, one that came before language, a being, not a becoming. No cartographer had fully mapped these endless spaces. There were villages buried in the backlands that never knew about the British Empire, villagers to whom the names of the nation's leaders and founding fathers would mean nothing, even though Wardha, where the Mahatma founded his ashram, was only a hundred-odd miles away. To journey down some of these tracks was to travel back in time for over a thousand years.
>
> (Rushdie 1999: 238)

This rather magical representation of India's uncharted depths is important in the economy of these texts in which the city is central; modernity is also identifiable as that which characterizes the distinction between urban and rural. The Orientalist and Conradian dichotomy between civilization and darkness is replicated within the national imaginary of an always already 'modern' cityscape and a yet-to-be-modernized and mysterious village life.

Thus the representation of 'world citizenship', in Rushdie's latest work, takes a predictable and rather mainstream form, in which a 'globalized' culture ends up being entirely contained and determined by the city, and ultimately, by New York. On the other hand, Seth can be identified with a cosmopolitan intellectual position related to his wide-ranging cultural settings and choice of genres. Literary cosmopolitanism in these two authors, especially in Rushdie, could be seen to be mainly anchored to a notion of secular modernity with a distinctly colonial genealogy. However, their writing opens up a possibility for a different sort of 'non-national' belonging that does not renounce the responsibilities of citizenship.

Conclusions

Beyond dialogism?

For Bakhtin, the novel serves to represent people's speech and their ideological worlds. One comes to know one's own language only as it is perceived in the speech of others. What occurs within the novel form is 'an ideological translation of another's language, and an overcoming of its otherness – an otherness that is only contingent, external, illusory' (Bakhtin 1981: 365). In this vision of novelistic language, as the novel form becomes more and more sophisticated, fewer and fewer 'rock bottom truths' remain without being drawn into dialogue. Is it ever possible then to move beyond the dialogism of the novel form in order to establish an 'irreducible' ethical stance of the narrator? Young points out the simultaneous advantages and disadvantages of dialogism to 'certain forms of minority politics'. On the one hand, in fact,

> it opens up the possibility of an opening to the other which does not construct it as an absolute other or transform it into the same. In addition, heteroglossia offers a means of breaking up the dominant monological discourses of oppressive systems, be they patriarchal, colonial, or neo-colonial, and allowing other voices to speak.
>
> (Young 1996: 58)

On the other hand, however, for Bakhtin the dialogic form of the novel can only dismantle falsity, and never reveal truth: 'truth is restored by reducing the lie to an absurdity, but truth itself does not seek words; she is afraid to entangle herself in the word, to soil herself in verbal pathos' (Bakhtin 1981: 309). It would appear that dialogism is an endlessly refracting discursive mechanism, which apparently disables dialectics (which is premised on the idea that essential change or development in the world occurs through the conflict of opposed processes) in its constant implication of the self in the other. It dissolves all boundaries so that conceptual distinctions as such become impossible to sustain (Young 1996: 61). It is not immediately obvious whether, given its 'internally riven economy', dialogism could offer a basis for a pragmatic reconciliation between secular and religious worldviews in the public sphere, rather than a mere uncritical acquiescence to cultural difference. However, Bakhtin explicitly rejects the idea that dialogism is a form of cultural relativism (1984: 69).[1]

In this book I have attempted to show how the postcolonial Indian novel employs the dialogism of the novel form as a privileged space for the representation of different worldviews. Novelistic language is in clear contrast to the more monologic language of the social sciences (as they are constituted at present, though I have also mentioned the recent historiographical trends that seek to 'dialogize' history, such as the *Subaltern Studies* collective). The novels discussed in this book directly address the problems arising from the conflict between previous religious and communitarian identities and the national secular identity that constitutionally defined Indian citizenship after 1947. This book has identified two representative positions in narratives of India in English. On the one hand, there is a secular rationalist position, which relegates religion to the 'private' narrative of the novel, and translates *bhasha* terms in a national metalanguage, namely English. On the other hand, there is an ongoing critique of Nehruvian secularism and an engagement with the complexities of religious belief in the sphere of the novel.

However, I would like to suggest that on an 'ethical-pragmatic' level, the 'language' of these novels is irreducible to dialogism. They can and should be linked together as narratives that move from a broadly similar perspective, that of a 'practical' secularism. Despite their different approaches to the relationship between nation and state, and to rationalism as a guiding principle in the conceptualization of the public sphere, they all display a similar rejection of its takeover by violent and sectarian political forces. All of these authors – Seth, Rushdie, Ghosh, Mistry and Tharoor – can be said to espouse a form of 'practical' secularism. Perhaps this is the irreducible kernel of their fiction which cannot be further dissolved into a dialogic relation with its opposite, sectarianism. This form of 'practical' secularism would broadly include both Rushdie's radical secularism and Seth's rationalist secularism. In a related gesture, Ghosh's espousal of syncretism as an alternative way of envisaging nationalism in the subcontinent can be included in this position. A ready justification for occupying a 'practical' secular position is premised on Gayatri Spivak's notion of 'strategic essentialism', which is a necessary consequence of putting theory into practice:

> Even as we talk about *feminist* practice, or privileging practice over theory, we are universalizing – not only generalizing but universalizing. Since the moment of essentializing, universalizing, saying yes to the onto-phenomenological question, is irreducible, let us at least situate it in the moment, let us become vigilant about our own practice and use it as much as we can rather than make the totally counter-productive gesture of repudiating it.
>
> (Spivak 1990: 11)

When the practice regulates or 'norms' the theory (as Spivak says), one gives away one's theoretical purity, because 'you pick up the universal that will give you the power to fight against the other side' (Spivak 1990: 12). It is the kind of strategy that without destroying these ideas, secularism, nationalism, internationalism, culturalism, shows that 'they have historical faultlines': they are vulnerable, as opposed to bad, ideas (Spivak 1990: 76). The novels articulate the complex interweaving of religious and secular identity in India today, while suggesting

different solutions for its negotiation, making use of the dialogic framework of the novel as a genre eminently suited for the staging of epistemological clashes. Nonetheless, beyond the dialogism inherent to the genre in which they have chosen to write, the authors reveal their ethical positions quite clearly. In doing so, they assume responsibility for their stories (of course Rushdie has been obliged to do so, on an extremely personal level, after the declaration of the *fatwa*). Their responsibility as postcolonial writers appears necessary at a time in which Hindutva and Islamism are becoming increasingly hegemonic versions of Hinduism and Islam in the globalized public sphere.

However, the problem of talking across a discursive divide in South Asia remains open. Where is the space in which to begin to address such a conflict? Might dialogism have a hermeneutical function in such an arena? Sunder Rajan suggests that perhaps the only possible way out of this problem is to focus on the question of gender. In doing so she sketches out the site for an effective negotiation between secularist and 'religious' positions. In a recent discussion, she lays out the complex theoretical and legal problems ensuing from both statist and communitarian interventions in the secularism issue, as it pertains to gender rights and the debate around a Uniform Civil Code in India (Sunder Rajan 2000). The establishment of a Uniform Civil Code is opposed by minority communities because they perceive it as a threatening imposition on the part of the majority community. It is a fact, however, that personal laws of all communities are discriminatory towards women (ibid.: 55). The debate at the present time is whether to allow 'a muted and qualified' support of state intervention in the matter of women's rights that are seen to be inadequately protected by communities, an 'inner realm' that is generally masculinized. Or conversely, to push for internal reform of the communities, so as to protect religious and cultural identities from a majoritarian state. In the debate over secularism, what very clearly emerges is that neither theoretical position – statist or communitarian – vis-à-vis the secularism question is unassailable. Both the secularism debates and the feminism debates on the Uniform Civil Code, in Sunder Rajan's view, 'point to the need for, even as they are reflexive about, the space for deliberations, consultation, argument, discussion, and consensus, which alone can produce meaningful social transformations' (ibid.: 67–8). This space, which is located outside the state and its institutions, is civil society. It is only within this space, which in India is contended by both religion and secularizing reform, that the secularism issue will be decided: 'through the clashes that take place on these terms and in this sphere, rather than by a peremptory intervention by the state or by initiatives within communities' (ibid.: 68). In this sense dialogism may yet have an important role to play in structuring exchanges and debates on secularism within civil society. The novel as a form points to a possible exchange between worldviews by allowing its readers to choose between the various discursive positions represented by the different characters and to empathize – perhaps even identify, at some level – with these varied religious/secular/sceptical perspectives. It remains to be explored if, and how, this dialogic negotiation is articulated in other postcolonial literatures that emerge out of different configurations of secular and religious tendencies in the public sphere.

Notes

Introduction

1 Rushdie's use of language is expressionistic in the sense that he does not aim for a 'realistic' representation, but rather strives to recreate an English that conveys the emotional and cultural impact of the 'source language'.
2 The expression 'present needs' is used by Michel Foucault in discussing different notions of the historical sense, that of the 'metaphysician' and that of the 'genealogist': 'In placing present needs at the origin, the metaphysician would convince us of an obscure purpose that seeks its realization at the moment it arises. Genealogy, however, seeks to reestablish the various systems of subjection: not the anticipatory power of meaning but the hazardous play of dominations' (Foucault 1977: 148).
3 However, visual culture also has a very strong transnational dimension, given the lucrative overseas market in *Ramayana* videos and DVDs and Hindu mythological films. The transnational dimension of Hindutva is most notably represented by the VHP (Vishwa Hindu Parishad, or World Hindu Council), who for years has been promoting Hindu culture in the US, especially among expatriates. Through its donations, it provides an important source of funds for the VHP in India. According to Arvind Rajagopal, the NRIs (Non-Resident Indians) support a militant nationalist and Hinduist party like the BJP at home as a way to reinforce their cultural and emotional links with India, and simultaneously to assert a cultural difference from the majority in their host country (Rajagopal 2001: 239–40).
4 By 'transnational' Indian nation I mean the audience of readers belonging to the Indian diaspora, which forms an important part of the readership of Indian literature in English.
5 'Nehruvianism, held to represent the consent of the majority, in fact involved only a small minority, comprised of the educated upper and middle classes' (Rajagopal 2001: 45).
6 Edmond and Jules de Goncourt define their 1864 novel, *Germinie Lacerteux*, a form of 'contemporary moral history' (de Goncourt 1990 [1864]: 5).
7 Sudipta Kaviraj defines Indira Gandhi's political doctrine as a 'particularly dangerous combination of a bourgeois leader invoking socialist principles to evade encumbrances of bourgeois constitutionalism' (1986: 1700).
8 Rajeswari Sunder Rajan emphasizes Rushdie's sexist use of allegory in constructing the Widow figure in *Midnight's Children*: 'The popular negative connotations of Hindu widowhood, viewed in the popular imagination not merely as the misfortune of women but as their destruction of the male, are associated with a (widowed) Prime Minister whose defining act is the massive sterilization programme of the Emergency' (Sunder Rajan 1993: 112).
9 India's transition from a colonial to a postcolonial state was in the form of a 'passive revolution'. The transformative role of the new national state was limited to reformist

and molecular changes, so that the coming of Independence acquired the dual character of revolution/restoration (Chatterjee 1986: 49).

10 The BJP, according to Rajagopal, capitalized on the serial's enormous success: 'Drawing on myth and devotionalism to portray a golden age of tradition that was yet ahead of the modern era in statecraft and warfare, the show which ran from January 1987 to September 1990 adroitly made appeals to diverse social groups, under a symbolic rubric that could be tied to the banner of Hindu assertion' (Rajagopal 2001: 15). Film and media are privileged mediums for interacting with devotional expectation, according to van der Veer, and thus the screening of the *Ramayana* on state television permitted viewers to feel connected as part of a religious gathering (*satsang*), while allowing everyone to stay at home with their own family. Van der Veer relates this unity of religious feeling through television to the doing of the novel, namely the imagining of a nation of individuals; 'and so it is not surprising that the success of [the *Ramayana*] has been related to the recent upsurge in religious nationalism' (Van der Veer 2001: 176).

11 This 'not yet' implicit in Seth's representation of participants in communal riots recalls Chakrabarty's critique of historicism as it informs ideas of 'political modernity' in the postcolonial context: 'Within this thought [historicism], it could always be said with reason that some people were less modern than others, and that the former needed a period of preparation and waiting before they could be recognized as full participants in political modernity. But this was precisely the argument of the colonizer – the "not yet" to which the colonized nationalist opposed his or her "now"' (Chakrabarty 2000: 9).

12 I thank Baidik Bhattacharya for indicating this article to me.

1 Theories of secularism

1 According to Jürgen Habermas, the idea of the bourgeois public sphere as constituted by the communication of rational beings was most fully developed by Immanuel Kant: 'The "world" in which the public was constituted designated the realm of the public sphere … in all its purity world was constituted in the communication of rational beings … "world" here pointed to humanity as species, but in that guise in which its unity presented itself in appearance: the world of a critically debating reading public that at the time was just evolving within the broader bourgeois strata' (Habermas 1992: 106).

2 Sen makes the example of hospital endowments from the state. The state may decide not to support any hospital with any religious connection whatsoever, or it may decide to support *all* hospitals, without discriminating between religious connections. While the former position may appear to be superficially more secular, the latter approach is *politically* quite secular because it supports hospitals irrespective of whether or not there are religious connections, and in this way, it keeps the state and religions quite separate.

3 Nehru's *The Discovery of India* has been defined as a 'foundational fiction' of the nation, in the sense that it can be regarded as preparing the ground for national projects that would be considered political in the more conventional sense. *The Discovery of India* used a composite genre to write about India, mixing autobiography, social analysis and the rewriting of imperialist history within a nationalist framework; 'the reader-citizen whom Nehru (who as "author" is himself also defined by his text) addresses the new Indian-in-the-making. Communities, like readers and viewers, are gathered and shaped through address' (Tharu and Lalita 1993: 51–2).

4 Sudipta Kaviraj identifies the cause of the gradual erosion of the secular political project in India with a failure on the part of the elite to continue the cultural construction of the nation after the end of the nationalist struggle: 'The ideology of nationalism gradually converted itself from an ideology of the people into an ideology

of the state, or to put it more cynically, into a Central subject. And the state, which in the best of circumstances, is not a good conversationalist, decided according to its internal logic to withdraw the reproduction of nationalist ideology from the field of political discourse. It converted, according to its own perverted definitions, what was an issue of discourse into a simple issue of power' (Kaviraj 1990: 194).

5 This definition is in contrast with the definition of secularism given by the Bharatiya Janata Party, which promotes a pro-Hindu position in politics: *dharma nirapekshata* = 'neutral stance towards all religions'. The BJP promotes neutrality, rather than equality, towards other religions. In policy terms, this means that the BJP is against special concessions to the rights of minority groups, such as Muslims being entitled to be judged according to a different personal law from Hindus. In some ways the difference between the BJP and the Congress positions resembles the two possible approaches to hospital endowments pointed out by Sen, the first superficially secular, the second politically so.

6 The equality of the individual citizen before the law is guaranteed by article 15(1) of the constitution, which says that 'the State shall not discriminate against any citizen on the grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex, place of birth or any of them' (*Constitution of India* 2000: 21). In the case of the Muslim community, however, the constitution still recognizes the rights of religious communities over and above individual rights. A famous case in point was that of the Muslim woman Shah Bano who sued for alimony from her divorced husband, though according to Muslim law she was not entitled to it. But she appealed under a section of the Indian Criminal Code (the same for all communities) designed to prevent vagrancy; the Supreme Court upheld her appeal, but ultimately the Prime Minister at the time, Rajiv Gandhi, over-ruled it with an Act of Parliament that declared that such matters would hereafter be decided within the Muslim community (the Muslim Women's Act). See Pathak and Sunder Rajan 1992: 257–79.

7 The problem in the present political situation is that the request for a uniform civil code, which women's groups have been requesting in the name of women's rights and equality, has been made by the BJP into an important item on its political agenda. Thus feminists are in the uncomfortable position of occupying the same stance on the request for a uniform civil code as the Hindu right. However, though the BJP mimics 'some of the liberal and feminist arguments defending a uniform civil code and rest their case on "gender justice" and "secularism", their anti-Muslim bias is pronounced, and a closer examination reveals that their version of gender justice is no more than a pragmatic design for a moderate Hindutva' (Sangari 1995: 3287). Given the fraught politics of asking for a uniform civil code, which could seem to over-ride the rights of communities in favour of a state-led Hinduizing reform of personal law, some theorists have argued for 'reverse optionality': 'that is, all citizens to be mandatorily covered by a gender-just code across "private" and "public" domains, but with the option to choose rather to be governed by the personal law of their religious community' (Sunder Rajan 2000: 64).

8 Nehru says that 'the whole history of India was witness of the toleration and even encouragement of minorities and of different racial groups. There is nothing in Indian history to compare with the bitter religious feuds and persecutions that prevailed in Europe. So we did not have to go abroad for ideas of religious and cultural toleration; these were inherent in Indian life' (Nehru 1946: 387).

9 David Krieger defines methodological conversion as 'communicative action' (1990: 238).

10 In criticizing the Anglicized generation of English-educated Bengalis prominent in Bengali cultural and intellectual life of the late nineteenth century, Bankimchandra asks: 'Who is the man amongst us who in personal purity, in meekness, in self-forgetfulness, in genuine non-political patriotic feeling, in tenderness for the least sentient thing, in lifelong and systematic devotion to knowledge and virtue for their

own sake, can stand a moment's comparison with the better order of minds nurtured in the cradle of Hinduism?' (Chattopadhyay 1872 in Chaudhuri 2001: 23–4).

11 Bankim's nationalist writing was characterized by a 'barely concealed hostility towards Islam' (Chatterjee 1986: 77).

12 This model of identity as a dual structure is clearly quite problematic for its rigid binarism, and indeed the distinction between the material and spiritual domains is much more shifting than Chatterjee allows for.

13 Chakrabarty explains the crucial difference between the construction of Indian and European national identity in the following terms: 'But if one result of European imperialism in India was to introduce the modern state and the idea of the nation with their attendant discourse of "citizenship", which, by the very idea of "the citizen's rights" (that is, "the rule of law"), splits the figure of the modern individual into public and private parts of the self … these themes have existed – in contestation, alliance, and miscegenation – with other narratives of the self and community that do not look to the state/citizen bind as the ultimate construction of sociality' (Chakrabarty 2000: 37).

14 Discovery is a structural trope in Nehru's conception of nationalism. During his 1935 electoral campaign around the country, he tells the Indian peasants of his idea of India as *Bharat Mata*. India is much more than the land, he tells them, it is the millions of people living in India, including themselves, who make up this *Bharat Mata*: 'and as this idea slowly soaked into their brains, their eyes would light up as if they had made a great *discovery*' (Nehru 1946: 48: emphasis added).

15 Gandhi's view of the state as founded on pre-sanctioned violence recall Walter Benjamin's and Giorgio Agamben's critiques of violence in relation to the state.

16 'Whether we are conscious of it or not, most of us worship at the invisible altar of some unknown god and offer sacrifices to it – some ideal, personal, national, or international; some distant objective that draws us on, though reason itself may find little substance in it; some vague conception of a perfect man and better world' (Nehru 1946: 527).

17 Nandy seeks to substitute the idea of a state secularism with the idea of religious tolerance in South Asia, claiming that 'each major faith in the region includes *within* it an in-house version of the other faiths both as an internal criticism and as a reminder of the diversity of the theory of transcendence' (Nandy 1998: 327).

18 Bakhtin's position on dialogism is not always easy to extrapolate. In *The Dialogic Imagination* he lays out his theory of the novel in the essay 'Discourse in the Novel', where he seems to suggest that dialogism is applicable to all types of novels. In his other work, *Problems in Dostoevsky's Poetics*, however, he appears to complicate the notion of the novel as a dialogic form by distinguishing between monologic and polyphonic novels.

2 Minority identity in India: *Midnight's Children* and *A Suitable Boy*

1 However, the Constitution contains a non-justiciable Directive Principle which declares that the state should endeavour to provide a uniform civil code for all its citizens: 'The State shall endeavor to secure for the citizens a uniform civil code throughout the territory of India' (Article 47, *Constitution of India* 2000: 58).

2 Nehru's concern with the definition of 'evacuee property' is evident in the letters he wrote fortnightly to his Chief Ministers (see Nehru 1986: 577).

3 In the last chapter I discuss how Rushdie's eclectic ideal has the downside of tending to embrace cultural globalization in a rather uncritical manner.

4 This trajectory is continued in Rushdie's revisitation of Bombay in *The Moor's Last Sigh*. Here the multicultural Bombay of the 1950s has been transformed into the Hinduized Mumbai of the 1990s, dominated by underworld bosses who espouse Hindutva.

3 Secularism and syncretism in *The Shadow Lines* and *The Satanic Verses*

1 The newspapers' official line at the time may have influenced Ghosh's reworking of their version of the facts, when he foregrounded the syncretic and 'naturally secular' feeling among the people of Kashmir at the theft of the relic.

2 The reason why it is plausible that Ghosh used this newspaper is that in a parenthesis, he says that 'the weather columns of the Delhi papers note that the water mains were frozen in Srinagar that day', and indeed the *Hindustan Times* (28 Dec. 1963), reported this fact on the same page in which it reported the theft of the sacred relic (Anonymous 1963a and 1963b: 1).

3 David Erdman warns us against reading these figures as angels and devils: 'below the apparent surface is an abyss or another sky, teeming with naked children and couples, who dance, embrace, soar, in the warmth of the flames that leap toward "and" (which makes a scroll round itself and tapers off as if drawn by the bird just beyond) to join "Heaven" and "Hell" – deadly block letters in themselves. Opposite the flaming side of the abyss are tiers, that seem earth or rock from an earthly perspective, emerging as a triangle of clouds in the heaven of Hell, from which a reclining angel (we assume) turns to embrace a devil, each looking the other squarely in the eye – though to call them angel and devil (when there is a halo – blue or gold – they share it) or to inquire into their sexes, neither manifestly male, may be to fall into an error like those corrected by the Devil on Plate 4' (Erdman 1974: 98).

4 Rushdie explicitly acknowledges, in an afterword, that Bhupen Gandhi is based on the poet Arun Kolatkar, and the book of poems about 'Gagari' is actually *Jejuri*.

4 Allegory and realism in the Indian novel in English

1 For example, Mahesh Kapoor – the Revenue Minister of Purva Pradesh, who is very active in promoting the Zamindari Abolition Bill in the state – has a possible real-life referent in the Revenue Minister of Bihar, K.B. Sahay, who was similarly instrumental in passing the bill which abolished zamindari in Bihar (Das 1993: 180–227).

2 See also the discussion in Chapter 2 of the relationship between passion and inter-religious unions in *A Suitable Boy*.

5 The historical event in the postcolonial Indian novel – I

1 O'Hanlon and Washbrook vigorously deny the idea that foundationalist histories of India, like Marxist ones, assume an undifferentiated and monolithic notion of a complex socio-economic formation such as capital. 'Capitalism as most contemporary Marxist historians see it indeed constitutes a system or process but one inherently conflictual and changeful, incapable of realizing or of stabilizing itself. It produces and operates through a wide variety of social relations of production and exploitation, which are themselves in constant transformation' (O'Hanlon and Washbrook 1992: 149).

6 The historical event in the postcolonial Indian novel – II

1 An example of the level to which this debate was informed by ideological stances on development issues, is the negative judgement of a 1960s American economist on land reform in Uttar Pradesh. To begin with, he finds the Act 'socialist'. He feels that the Act did not directly lead to a significant increase in agricultural productivity. He believes that the real problem faced by the Indian rural economy was the absence of a marketable surplus of agriculture: 'the tendency of the cultivator to consume all his produce is a major threat to development' (Neale 1962: 249). For Neale the priority of the land reform should have been increase in agricultural productivity, rather than

societal change. However, for Nehru a fast growth rate was not an end in itself, and a too-rapid development might have put India's economic independence at risk.

2 And yet peasant protest seems to have been a leading factor in the 1950s land reform, at least in the state of Bihar: 'Although by the time independence had been achieved, the organized peasant movement in Bihar had split itself up into so many factions that it had lost much of its vigour, the sentiments generated and the ideas aroused by it compelled the state to try and reform the agrarian structure, lest peasant fury become uncontrollable and result in overthrowing the very institution of private property as in China' (Das 1993: 181).

7 Languages of the nation in *Midnight's Children* and *A Suitable Boy*

1 Italics have been added. A rough translation would be: 'Come on, two or four people get down and push … Come on board, brother, come on board. Let's go!'

8 Cosmopolitanism and globalization in Rushdie and Seth

1 This is not to say that the other novels discussed in the book cannot be read as cosmopolitan fictions; indeed they can, and have been. In particular, *The Satanic Verses* has been seen as an example of globalized fiction, with the split figure of the migrant at its centre, in its dual incarnation of Gibreel and Saladin.

2 Bombay is represented as a secular and cosmopolitan city in *Midnight's Children*, as opposed to Delhi, which is associated with communalism and religious strife. *The Moor's Last Sigh* is in many ways an elegy for the decline of its cosmopolitanism, coinciding with its political appropriation by the Shiv Sena in the 1990s, and its changed name, Mumbai, as the emblem of its Hinduization and nativization.

3 Walter Mignolo comments that 'Kant's cosmopolitanism presupposes that it could only be thought out from one particular geopolitical location: that of the heart of Europe, of the most civilized nations' (2000: 735).

4 Seth's position is quite Kantian here. Kant also establishes that cosmopolitanism is the precondition for love among human beings: 'Both the love of man and the respect for the rights of man are our duty, the former is only conditional, while the latter is an unconditional, absolutely imperative duty, a duty that one must be completely certain of not having transgressed, if one is to be able to enjoy the sweet sense of having done right' (Kant 1987 [1795]: 139).

Conclusions: beyond dialogism?

1 See also discussion on dialogism in Chapter 1.

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